

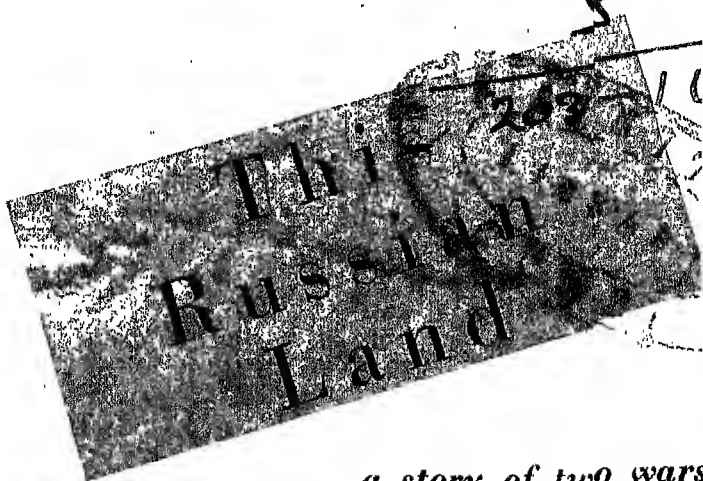


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a story of two wars

From the pen of one of the outstanding Russian writers who have made their home in England comes a moving and genuinely thrilling tale of "This Russian Land," the very land on which a decisive part of the world battle is being fought at this moment. It is the fascinating story of an ordinary Russian village in the last war, when invasion comes to the peaceful land of the peasant, and the Kaiser's Germans bring with them horror and persecution, burning and rape, hunger and fear. Guerillas rise against the invader, who is harrassed and fought wherever he goes, until the last German is driven from the soil of Mother Russia. An old peasant is the central figure of Borodin's novel. The hero of the first world war finds himself faced with the problems of a new world, and a new Russia. He lives through the hard times of the first and second Five-year-plan but he goes willingly through this transition period; at the end of which the Russian worker and the Russian peasant find themselves in better and happier circumstances than ever before. This peace and happiness comes to an abrupt end in June, 1941, when Hitler's Nazi hordes invade Soviet Russia, and the heroic period of brave resistance and unparalleled sacrifice begins. Once more the Germans come to the peaceful village and once more they burn it to the ground. They repeat the terrible story of blood and hunger, murder and hate. But once more the Russian peasant rises to defend his land. On a wide, brilliant, colourful canvas George Borodin paints a picture of eternal Russia which is an outstanding contribution to the literature of our days.

THIS RUSSIAN LAND

By the Same Author

STREET OF A THOUSAND MISTERS

THOSE BORGIA'S

VISIONS OF CONTEMPT

BASTARD ANGELS

ETC.

THIS RUSSIAN LAND

By
GEORGE BORODIN

HUTCHINSON & CO. (*Publishers*), LTD.
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BOOK ONE

'If a stranger visit Russia, let him come as a guest. But if he come with the sword, by the sword shall he perish. By that stands and shall stand the Russian land.'

PRINCE ALEXANDER NEVSKY,
*after the defeat of the Teutonic
knights on Lake Peipus: 1242.*

ONE

RISE six feet, the massive green stalks of the sunflowers stood like an enormous hedge between the bright blue Ukrainian sky and the brown fertile earth. The round, almost inquisitive heads of the sunflowers were turning upwards to the savage and burning light.

A small boy moved stealthily through the prickly undergrowth. Stretching himself to his full length, he tried to pick the few remaining ripe seeds from the flowers' pithy heads, but the height of the stalks defied him. Angrily, he shook one like a tree. It cracked in his hands and toppled over, bruising him across his small body. Gleeefully, the little boy tore at the large black disc and, extracting a few of the seeds, began cracking them open between his teeth.

Then, impatiently, with rabbit-like agility, he thrust a handful of seeds into his mouth and began chewing them hungrily, spitting out the husks one by one. His small inflated stomach looked like that of a pregnant gnome. His sunken and hollow cheeks bore witness to long privation. The boy was starving in the Ukraine, the land where, they say, a man had only to spit on the earth for grain to appear. . . .

The child stopped chewing suddenly. He wrinkled up his deep-set fever-fired eyes and hunched his shoulders. He was listening. Then, with a small cry, he threw himself upon the earth, digging his hands into the rich loam. Listening for a bare moment, he leapt up and scurried madly through the undergrowth like an animal pursued by a prairie fire. It was not fire. It was the Cossacks.

A thin line, some hundred yards long, was moving like a thunder-storm through the fields. The men's yelling and singing mingled with the jingle of their spurs. Their cloaks and hoods flew behind them so that they looked like giants who had grown wings. Stretching their sabres before them, they swung them amongst the tall sunflowers, lopping off the black heads. They were cutting them down savagely, remorselessly. They were testing out their blades in this massacre of the sunflowers. And their blades wore sharp. They rode through a field almost a mile long, leaving fantastic furrows which wheeled and turned in harmony with the horsemen's progress. The dirt kicked up by the horses' hooves powdered itself like grey flour in the air and sent up a haze which hovered over the galloping Cossacks.

Vassili Kovalenko's face was pock-marked with the green juice of the sunflower stalks and the dirt flung up by the horsemen preceding him in this wild and senseless race.

Suddenly a deep groan rose up from the parched throats of the Cossacks. The village that was to have been their resting place was nothing more than a pitiful wreck, a skeleton made of the charred bones of burnt rafters. A soft wind was blowing the grey ash into their faces. It stuck to their sweaty, blackened foreheads, so that they looked like ghosts. Tugging sharply at their horses' reins, the men glared at each other silently for a moment and then burst into loud swearing.

"We've come to a cemetery," they cried. "We were promised rest, food, and drink."

The Commander, a youngish man, with a bristly red moustache, raised his hand calling for silence. He dismounted, and then lifting up his Cossack kaftan almost to his top boots strode in amongst the smouldering ruins.

"What did I tell you," he said, flicking the dust off his uniform. "That's all the Red devils have left you. We will have to push on. They can't be far. Some of the ash is still warm."

Vassili Kovalenko gazed with startled, almost unbelieving eyes, at the desolation.

"Brothers," he murmured, "this is my village." He spurred his horse roughly in the flanks and the animal trod gingerly into the embers, sending up a fine cloud of dust. "This was my hut. Here I was born. The first Red I find, I shall stuff with gunpowder and send him up like a rocket." He shook his fist fiercely in the air.

The men were not listening to Vassili Kovalenko. They were tired. They had ridden the whole of that day pursuing the Reds, trying to smite them on the flank with a lightning manoeuvre which was to have carried them to Kiev itself. They spat angrily on their hands and prepared to seize the reins and ride away once more, but the horses began pricking up their ears and treading backwards as if frightened by something.

"Ho, hey there," Kovalenko cried-out, pulling at his nag's mane. "Darzish—hold yourself, my beauty."

The company cocked their rifles at the small scurrying sound which was coming from behind a half-burnt-out wall. The Commander took out his revolver and beckoned to his men to raise their rifles. Five hundred went up to the shoulder. The catches were released.

"Come out," the officer ordered. He sent a shot whining into the dust.

The boy who had been picking sunflower seeds crawled out on all fours and lay trembling at the officer's feet. The men burst out laughing.

"Poor little louse," they said. "Hey, gospodin, who are you?"

The boy lifted up his face.

"Mitka," he answered.

"Where are the others?" the officer asked.

"I don't know." The boy sat up on his haunches and drew a pattern in the ash. "They have all gone. They forgot me. I have been eating sunflowers and earth, see." He scraped aside the ash and took some earth in his fist and then put it into his mouth as if it were some delicious pudding.

Vasili Kovalenko watched the child aghast. He had seen worse sights than this, but he was suddenly stung to pity. He swung down from his saddle and without dismounting picked up the boy with his great hairy claw and pulled him into the saddle beside him.

"Who did all this?" he demanded. "Who burned my village?" He pressed the child to his breast, trying to drown the boy's trembling in his own agitated body.

"Nemtsy . . . the Germans," the boy replied. "They were here this morning. The moujiks had fled already. They had taken everything with them. The Nemtsy were mad. They danced about while setting fire to the huts . . . they . . ."

The child's description was cut short by a shot. Others followed. The man in the officer's uniform sagged in his saddle and toppled over.

"Liar," the Cossacks shouted, brandishing their sabres towards the dead White Guard officer. "Merzavetz . . . scoundrel. Hangmen. We'll show them. They all wanted us to believe that the Bolsheviks were our real enemies!"

They rode off into the sunflowers again. Vasili Kovalenko held the child with one arm and with the other he swung his sword. His thoughts went back to his own family. His little boy must be the same age as the one he was supporting on the saddle beside him.

"Scoundrels, hangmen . . ." the wind carried across the land the shouts of the Cossacks.

TWO

THE third and eighth Russian armies of Generals Ruski and Brusilov crossed the river San and besieged the great fortress of Przemyśl in Austrian Galicia.

The heads of the newly formed pro-Austrian Union for the Liberation of the Ukraine had fled to Vienna, and when the Russians entered Przemyśl they found the town decorated with Russian flags.

General Brusilov noted in his diary: 'I must say that, not only in Eastern Galicia, where the majority of the population is Russian and has been well disposed towards us for a long time, but also in Western Galicia where the population is Polish, not only the peasants, but even the clergy of the Catholic Church, showed signs of sympathy and in many cases helped us as much as they could.'

Austrian Galicia became part of the Hapsburg patrimony after the partition of Poland during the reign of Maria Theresa. At the ancient town of Lvov—the capital city of the province—the Austrians had encouraged and backed the growth of the Ukrainian Separatists in order to weaken the Russian state. There was also the prospect of

uniting the tail—Galicia—to the larger dog—the Ukraine, and forming a puppet state under Austrian domination.

The Cossack Vasili Kovalenko did not understand affairs of state. He had been recruited with the Zaporozhe Cossacks, and had ridden out of his native Ukraine to battle for the double-headed eagle of the Czars in defence of his Fatherland.

When the German offensive followed and turned the Russian successes in Galicia, Vasili Kovalenko was captured. It happened like this.

The Germans, furious at the Austrian defeats, sent a large army to drive General Brusilov out of Galicia, and in the fighting which ensued Kovalenko and his company were surrounded by the enemy and almost annihilated to a man. Vasili was captured with a broken sabre in his hand. He struggled like a beast, kicking and tearing at his captors, and expecting that any moment a bullet would be put through his head. Instead he was tied up with a thick jute rope and dragged into line with the other prisoners.

"They treat me as if I was a savage," he complained, pushing out his enormous chest, and straining the rope so that his muscles stood out like sausages.

They were ordered to march without speaking, but the ruddy Cossack refused to obey the order. He jeered openly at his captors so that at last, to escape his taunts, they thrust a dirty gun-rag into his mouth. They pushed it into his mouth so hard that his eyes nearly jumped out. All that was left to him to sneer with was his nose. He lifted up his nostrils like a high-bred horse and growled defiantly somewhere in his stomach.

His furious mood relaxed only when he found that two of his bosom friends—Ooha and Dimitri—had been captured in a previous engagement with the enemy. The prisoners had been thrust into a field surrounded by barbed wire and were eating mouldy-looking slop when Vasili Kovalenko was pushed into the enclosure with them. They rose to meet him, gently undid his ropes and pulled out the rag from his mouth. The first thing that Kovalenko said was: "Boys, I'm thirsty. The beasts must have marched us a thousand versts. I'd drink horse urine if I could get it." He then fainted.

When Vasili recovered, he found Ooha pouring water into his mouth, whilst Dimitri was busily tearing the clothes off his back. "Hey, you, what is this?" Kovalenko protested.

"You have been wounded," Ooha informed him. "You've got a slash on your back as big as a furrow."

"Pooh, the impudence. They hadn't the courage to kill me," Kovalenko boasted.

For a whole year the Ukrainian Cossacks moved from one camp to another, farther and farther, it seemed, into the interior of the Austrian Empire. They had heard of Brusilov's new victories only from recently captured Russian prisoners. The great 1916 push by the Russian Army was the last. By the beginning of 1917, the

number of Russian prisoners in German hands was about three million. Half of these men had been captured without any weapons in their hands. Some had fought only with axes or long wooden staves. The prisoners grumbled, they swore, and on occasions some of them even staged minor prison revolts, but Kovalenko, like most of the men, was growing despondent. They all were wondering when the war would end.

One day, the German Commandant entered the prison camp, followed by a large retinue of silk-hatted civilians. He summoned the prisoners together. "Soldiers," he addressed them, "the war is nearly over. The German and Austrian armies are moving towards the liberation of the Ukraine. All Ukrainians are asked to take a step forward."

Vasili Kovalenko beamed. "I am a Ukrainian," he said, nudging his elbow into Ooha's side. "There, what did I tell you? They are frightened of keeping us in prison. What about you, Ooha? You are a Moscovite. And Dimitri, isn't he a Caucasian? I refuse to step out of line without you two. Come on, boys, let's all be Ukrainians together."

The three men shrugged their shoulders. "We might as well," they agreed.

About three hundred men out of a camp of some six hundred took one step forward.

"Left turn!"

They turned left obediently, waved their hands to their other comrades and marched off.

"I expect we are being exchanged," Ooha prophesied.

Ooha had the broad cheerful face of the Great Russians. It was so broad that his ears seemed to join together at the back of his head. He was nicknamed Ooha because of his inordinate love for fish-soup, although his real name was Stepka—that is, Steven Mihailovitch Druzin.

Dimitri, the other 'Ukrainian', was a fair-skinned Caucasian, tall, lithesome as a willow, with a long, proud face that always managed to look clean and spruce despite prison-camp difficulties. His uniform was the only which had by some miraculous means preserved its shape. He used to wash it regularly and iron it by the primitive means of sitting on it for long periods. When all the other men used to clean their boots with spittle, he would skim off the thin greasy swamp that lay on top of his midday soup and would apply it to his boots.

"The trouble with you boys," said Kovalenko, as they marched to the unknown destination, "is that none of you can speak Hahol. You are too smart with your Russian. Broaden it a bit, so. After all, if you are going to disguise yourselves, you might as well do it properly." So during the three hours' march Kovalenko taught his willing pupils countless Ukrainian slang words, a few gestures, especially the one where you wipe your nose on your sleeve and then smack your breeches with the other hand.

"Where are we going to?" Dimitri asked hotly of one of the guards

He spoke in pigeon German.

"Rastatt," the guard murmured by way of an answer.

They noticed that his tone was more respectful. "He is afraid," whispered Kovalenko. That was always his remark when anybody was polite. "They are just frightened of us. Can you imagine it? Can you see Kaiser William speaking to Kaiser Franz Joseph? 'These Ukrainian boys,' says William, 'they are a hot lot. They will never do what they are told. They are a rowdy crowd. We must separate them. We must put them into a stone dungeon with iron shackles and rats.'"

Ooha's eyes opened wide. "Here," he said, "I am not that anxious to be a Ukrainian. What about you, Dimitri? Shall we tell them the truth?"

Vasili roared with laughter. "I said it to test you. Did you see those silk-hatted fellows? I bet they are undertakers. We're as good as dead. We might as well be cheerful. Life must come to an end. I propose that before they kill us we ask them to let us sing a few of our native songs."

"I won't sing for the infidels," said Dimitri the Caucasian, who was a Mohammedan.

"Ah, well," Ooha pulled out a mouth-organ and began strumming a tune. It was a cheerful little Hopak which helped the men to speed their step. Even the guards began to smile at the merry innocent face of Ooha, who pulled his mouth all over the instrument as if it were made of rubber.

"Enough of that," said Kovalenko, "listen to me." He began singing in a rich bass voice. It was an old Cossack marching song, almost an historical relic from the sixteenth century.

"Cossacks whistled" (he whistled). "They were marching,
Marching far away at midnight. . . .
Dark brown eyes of Marusenka
They will soon be blind for weeping."

"Who is Marusenka?" Ooha jibed.

"Doesn't matter who she is," Kovalenko answered, irritated at the interruption. "Marusenka is a girl. Every girl, if you like. She is my wife, for instance. Yes, my wife." Then his throat poured out another verse:

"Weep not, weep not, Marusenka,
Be not sad. Rise from your sorrow.
Pray the good God for thy dearest."

By the time they finally reached the town of Rastatt, it was already dawn. They had marched the whole night. The men were as ravenous as wolves. They were met outside a large barrack gates by a delegation of men, all wearing Ukrainian Cossack uniforms. One of them who introduced himself as Professor Bezpalko, gave them a long-winded welcome, calling them brothers and all sorts of other complimentary names. "You are coming with us," he informed them, "you will fight for your beloved Ukraine. What do you say, men?"

The men said they were hungry.

Then the barrack doors were opened and the company streamed in. "Food, food," they yelled. Like hungry wolves, they stamped their feet and whistled.

"I could eat that talking parrot himself," said Kovalenko. "My, how I would have enjoyed a slice from his fat little rump."

The Cossacks did not have long to wait. More doors were opened and the men streamed in to a large well-heated hall where stood row upon row of shining deal tables, well laden with bread, salt, and bowls of steaming soup in which floated small lumps of meat.

"Meat," Kovalenko shouted. "Long live the Ukraine! Boys, these are not fakes, these are real men."

The hungry prisoners rushed at the tables and seated themselves not only on the benches but on the tables themselves. They seized the great platters of soup and drank them down like beer, popping the hot pieces of meat into their mouths, wiping the platters dry with huge chunks of bread.

More soup and meat was brought into the hall by their 'Ukrainian brothers'. The Austrian guards stood round and laughed good-humouredly. Kovalenko did not like it. "What are they watching us for?" he demanded.

"Perhaps it's our last meal," Ooha suggested. "Just as you said. Who knows, why should these Nemtsy, these dumb dolts, give us food? What have we done to deserve it? I think I should say my prayers." And as if to show that he meant it, Ooha flopped on the boards and began to mumble something. He prayed to the Virgin Mary, to his Patron Saint, and crossed himself so many times that he became almost dizzy.

This scene affected all the rest of the prisoners. They looked at each other, uncertain whether Ooha had gone mad or whether really the time had come for them to say their last prayers. An atmosphere of hysteria grew in the room. The men began grouping themselves into a solid phalanx, pulling out their fists.

The Cossack who had greeted them at the barrack gates rushed agitatedly into the room. "What is this, brothers? What are you praying for? Peace be with you. Have you not come to us to be our brothers? To join us in our fight?"

"What fight?" Kovalenko inquired, "who are we going to fight? Tell us now. We'll follow you. Is it the Germans?"

"The Germans are our friends," said Professor Bezpalko urbanely. "You have made a mistake."

"Have we?" Kovalenko grinned. "The Austrians have kept us in prison for over two years. Was that a mistake?"

"Yes, that was a mistake too," answered Bezpalko. "Why, they have realized their mistake. They brought you out. They feed you. Isn't that a sign of trust? They are going to give you back your arms."

"Are they going to give us back our horses?" some of the men

mumbled. "What have they done to our horses? How are the dear ones?"

"Oh, your horses are well looked after," Bezpalko replied. "You will be given better horses, big strong ones, as fat as barrels with beautiful legs. But all in good time. You must be patient. You must first understand what it means to be a Ukrainian."

The men looked at each other dumbfounded. What was this man talking about? Weren't they Ukrainians? And what on earth did he mean by knowing how to be a Ukrainian? You are either born a Ukrainian, or you are not.

Bezpalko, their self-appointed leader, did not satisfy their curiosity there and then. "You must rest, boys," he said, paternally. "We will speak about it to-morrow."

"Where do we rest?" the men demanded. "Shall we sleep here on the tables?"

"You are amongst friends. You have finished with prison life. You are soldiers once again. The glorious independent Ukraine—come!"

The Cossacks streamed after him to another part of the building. He showed them a long dormitory where stood real iron bedsteads with warm blankets.

"Is this for us?" the men gasped.

"All for you," said Bezpalko.

The prisoners pushed past him without any ceremony and flung themselves on the beds, joyfully feeling the hard springs of the army bed. "We are in Paradise," said Kovalenko. "The Germans have probably gone mad. You know they do that. They suddenly go mad. You don't know where you are with them. Yesterday they fed us on squashed lice. To-day they give us horse-meat. They are up to something. . . ."

Ooha and Dimitri shook their heads mournfully.

THREE

THE sharp cheerful notes of the reveillé sounded throughout the dormitory. It broke through Kovalenko's dreams just when he was imagining he was mounting a horse. When he woke up, he found the bed pillow tucked between his legs; his two friends sitting up in bed were brushing the sleep out of their eyes and laughing.

"It's quite the real thing," said Ooha, yawning, opening his mouth so wide that his broken, rotten teeth looked like moss-covered horse-shafts.

The bugler gave one more cheerful toot on his trumpet and pulled it smartly from his lips, holding it against his shoulder as if he was on a parade ground. In the doorway stood a magnificent Cossack, wearing a black kopak on his head and a spotless white woollen dress, blazing with golden bullet-holders on his chest. "Hey, lads, let me introduce myself to you. I am your Ataman, Preobrajensky. You

will be seeing a lot of me. In a few months I will have you all ship-shape ready for the scrap. Now, get washed and come in to breakfast."

"This is a nuisance," Kovalenko remarked, springing up from his pillow. "Lads, I believe we are dreaming. But let's make the best of it."

The men trooped out of the room, pattering with their stockinged feet on the wooden floor. They were herded into the bathroom, a rough affair, composed of two enormous clay sinks over which a canister was suspended. They splashed about like drakes, swabbing themselves with a rough sandy-textured carbolic soap.

Ooha and Kovalenko took this procession of luxury for granted. They were certain it wouldn't last. But the other men were full of ideas. They didn't hurry themselves over the washing but argued interminably. When they finally emerged from the bathroom, they were led into a well-heated room, naked except for a few coarse towels twisted round their loins. Before them, arrayed in wooden lockers were piles of uniforms, soft, white, and inviting. They rushed forward, slapping each other aside with their still moist hands, struggling to get to the uniforms. After a full hour the sizes were sorted out and the men began to swagger.

"Hoo, cut by a Moscow tailor!" Kovalenko mockingly pressed his hands to his lips and twirled round. "Boys, I know what it is. It is a gift from the Czar. The Czar has taken Austria. He has ordered them to make clothes for us. Why, he even appointed an Ataman. That's how thoughtful he was."

"Whoever heard of this Preobrajensky!" Ooha growled. "Did you notice his accent? He is no Hahol. He is a Galician."

"You are no Cossack," grinned Kovalenko. "What does it matter? He is a good fellow."

The men had finished dressing and were talking amongst themselves. The most prominent of the voices, certainly the most authoritative, was that of Grishka. He was not a Cossack, but a Ukrainian nevertheless. He was a miner who had enjoyed 'a period of rest', as he called it, in Siberia for his political beliefs. Released on an amnesty, he had been put into the front line and had been captured and thrown into the same cage as Kovalenko and the others.

He had broad, good-humoured features; the signs of his profession were eaten heavily into the deep furrows on his face so that his physiognomy was perpetually grey, no matter how much he washed it or how much he smiled. He was not a big man but very agile, with strong miner's biceps. He kept very much to himself because the Cossacks did not trust him. He was not one of them, so to speak. But on this occasion he spoke out boldly and they listened to him.

"What's all this frippery for?"

The men didn't like that. "Don't you call our uniform frippery," they warned him. "You are no Cossack. You can be glad to wear the uniform. Well, we'll make you into one yet."

"What about this Hetman?" Grishka shouted in defiance. "Did

you elect him? Even I know that. The Cossacks always elect their Hetmans."

"That's true," said Kovalenko, as if the idea had just struck him. "Grishka is right. Did we elect this Preobrajensky?"

"True," said the men in chorus. "Did we?"

Kovalenko beamed magnanimously, taking credit for the outburst. Ooha supported him noisily.

"Well, boys, we'd better wait and see," one of the older men counselled. "They have given us beds, au niform, they will probably give us breakfast if we keep quiet. What have we got to lose?"

They received food, a whole bowl of steaming kasha, a mass of rye full of black specks and sometimes a casual stone. But the men didn't mind. They ate heartily.

"First kasha I have tasted for two years."

"It really feels like home."

"We ought to be grateful."

When the food was finished, that is, the bowls had been licked clean and the weak tea had been swallowed, the men undid their belts a little, sat back on their benches and waited for the second act. It appeared in the form of Professor Bezpalko. The eminent gentleman stood arrayed in Cossack uniform. It looked a little odd with his pince-nez, but he was in a very good humour as he entered the room, rubbing his hands. There was a positive glitter in his pale blue-grey eyes.

Except for his academic sniff one might have mistaken him for a Cossack—at a distance. The uniform was obviously new and his boots squeaked ludicrously. The men laughed. Their trained eyes could tell a fake Cossack a mile off. But they received the professor with polite silence.

Behind the professor walked the self-styled hetman, and behind him two Austrian officers who did not move their hands from their holsters for one minute. The professor sniffed and began his carefully prepared harangue:

"Cossacks of the Ukraine, brothers! The day of your liberation is at hand. You are free men in a friendly country. I came to you to proclaim the formation of the Ukrainian army which will fight with our friends to liberate our fair fields, our mother Kiev from the hands of the enemy."

"Hurrah, hurrah," the men shouted.

"Give us our sabres!" Kovalenko shouted. "Where are our braces? You don't expect us to fight with rulers?"

"You will get your sabres in time," the Ataman snapped back impatiently.

"Brothers, you will be armed," the professor continued.

"Will we be given horses?" someone prompted him.

"Yes, the finest horses," the professor said, nodding at the hint.

"Will you take an oath?"

The men looked at each other. At that moment they felt a need for a leader. Since Kovalenko had done most of the talking, they all

looked at him. He stepped forward without modesty. "What oath is it, friends?"

"It is to liberate the Ukraine," the professor answered. "Swear on your honours, swear by your broad rivers, by your God, by all that you hold dear, that you will struggle for the liberation of the Ukraine."

"An easy enough oath," Kovalenko replied. "We swear, don't we boys?"

The men stamped their feet. "We swear," they said. "Now do we get our sabres and horses?"

"Come, wait!" the Ataman ejaculated. "Patience. There are preliminaries. We will divide you up into districts. Which of you come from the Don and which from the Dnieper?"

"We are all Zaporozhens," Kovalenko answered.

"That's well answered," the Ataman returned. "They seem to have elected you spokesman. How would you like to be my second-in-command?"

Kovalenko beamed. "Wouldn't mind," he said. "Do I get more to eat?"

"Same as the others," came the reply.

"Good. I only put the question forward to test you. We are all equals here. We are accustomed to elect our Ataman," he added slyly.

"Yes," said the men, "that's what we are accustomed to."

"But I have been elected," the Commander answered. "You are not the only Cossacks here, you know. Why, there are about fifteen thousand of you. I was elected by them. Will you accept me?"

There was silence for a moment. Kovalenko looked uncertain at the Ataman. "Might as well," he said. "You sound a likeable fellow. Say, just answer one question: How many Germans have you killed?"

The Ataman was obviously embarrassed by the question. His silent appeal was quickly answered by Professor Bezpalko. "He is a brave man, your Ataman," he assured the Cossacks. "But he has stopped killing Germans. We are now friends with them."

"What, has peace been declared?" Ooha asked, opening his eyes wide. "Are we going home?"

The men jostled forward, surrounding the Professor. Their faces were full of light.

"You will go home," said the Ataman, "with swords in your hands. You will cut your way through and liberate the Ukraine."

"But who are we to liberate it from?" asked Kovalenko slyly.

"Why, from the Russians, of course."

"What Russians? Aren't we all Russians here?"

"No, we are Ukrainians," the Ataman answered. "You are an ignorant lot," he shook his head mournfully. "But we'll remedy that, won't we, Professor?"

"That is our purpose," returned his colleague confidently.

Without further ado, the men were divided up into villages. Those who wanted to serve in the same platoon were encouraged to do so.

Finally, men who had been leaders and junior officers were carefully sorted out. The commissioned officers and various Atamans had already been segregated in the prison camp, and been sent to an unknown destination.

The men took their herding in good part. It was a marvellous relief for them, even a diversion from the terrible conditions in the prison camp, from the hunger and the cold and the perpetual insult to their manhood. These men who had known the freedom which comes from riding a swift horse and tasting the wind, were openly enjoying their new experience. Readily they had sworn the oath although only a few of them knew its meaning. They were equally ready to do the tasks which were being assigned to them.

"The first thing is to learn how to read and write," said the Professor. "Your oppressors have kept you ignorant. But we will teach you. How many of you can either read or write?"

A few of the men stepped forward proudly, but a brief examination showed that their maximum capacity ran to a few signs of the alphabet which they drew out painfully on paper. Every word that the Professor gave out turned into their own surname. Kovalenko was proudest of all. He wrote his in a large scrawl. He printed it in letters three inches high.

"So you imagine you are Stenka Rasin himself," the Professor joked. "Well, you look an intelligent fellow. We'll put you right soon."

Kovalenko resented the imputation that he needed to be put right. But as his section was the first to receive the blessings of literacy, he submitted with a good grace. "What's the harm in it?" he said to Ooha. "It won't hurt me to know how to write. It will make the old woman look silly; besides, when I return and show her how to draw things on paper. Hey, Professor, how do you write 'old woman'?"

"B—a—b—a," the Professor spelled out.

And Kovalenko's first torments began. He was quick to learn. In the first week he mastered the whole of the alphabet.

But the Cossacks did not complain of their treatment. In the evenings they were allowed to sing their national songs. Indeed, it was encouraged. They heard the Professor telling the Ataman that the songs were a good prelude to the history lessons. Indeed, the classes were usually begun with a song. After that they sat listlessly about listening with long faces to the Professor's words, letting them pour in through one ear and out of the other, sniffing, blowing their noses loudly or speaking nostalgically of home. The class invariably ended with: "When do we get our sabres and our horses?" The only two things that really mattered to them.

They left it to Grishka and Kovalenko to ask all the questions, and all noticed how the Professor would always dismiss Grishka's questions impatiently whilst he would answer Kovalenko's at great length. The simple Cossack had a sudden burning love for knowledge. He felt it would be more in keeping with the station of a second-in-command if he knew how to read and write, let alone absorb some of

the other wisdom which the majority of these fellows refused to accept.

They sat about fashioning little swords out of wood, poking them into each other like children and laughing uproariously. Some of these men had great livid scars across their faces. Their gentle play was something like that of a tiger. Only when they sang their songs did they really come to life. With peerless voices they imitated the noise of horse-hooves in the steppes.

"Oh, for the smell of a horse!" Kovalenko would say almost passionately, when stripping himself naked before lying down in the army bed so generously provided by the Austrian Government.

FOUR

THREE months passed.

"These men are not much good!" Professor Bezpalko was saying to the Ataman. "A few of them have learned to read and write; but all the others think about are sabres and horses. The sooner they can get to do some fighting, the better!"

It was August, 1917. The Russian front had steadily moved back into Polodia and Volhynia. The February Revolution had already replaced the Czar and Kerensky was head of the provisional government. The Eastern Front was in process of disintegration. Except in Finland, there was no particular fervour for national independence. A shadow-army of Ukrainians, carefully trained and sponsored by the Germans and Austrians, did not number more than two thousand men although originally it was intended that fifteen thousand should serve. For one reason or another men were rejected either as unreliable or, more often, because they refused to fight against their own people. The success of Professor Bezpalko and his camp at Rastatt was by no means brilliant. Out of five hundred men he was only able to send fifty to join the two thousand contingent of the 'Taras Shvchenko' regiment. Among these men was Kovalenko, Ooha, and Dimitri Mudry. Grishka, too, had volunteered, but for different reasons.

The men had been thoroughly hoodwinked, and it is doubtful whether Professor Bezpalko would even have passed out fifty men as reliable from his 'academy' if it had not been for the fact that the war—as far as the Russians were concerned—was over, and another Professor was organizing a Ukrainian Conference in Kiev. The Provincial Government of Kerensky had no objection, since the self-determination of nationalities was blazoned on his banners.

The Rada, or Ukrainian Parliament, reflected only too well the state of confusion. It was full not only of Nationalists but Liberals, even Socialists. As the front disintegrated, the Kerensky Government tried frantically to bolster up with various Ukrainian regiments. But these men refused. They preferred to stand before Kiev and guard the Rada.

In the face of events, Professor Hrushevsky—the Ukrainian leader

—was compelled to turn further and further to the Germans and Austrians. When the October Revolution brought the Bolsheviks into power, Hrushevsky said they were bent on a peace with the Germans at Brest Litovsk. He hastened to send delegates. Peace negotiations started on 8th January, 1918.

Meanwhile the two thousand Cossacks recruited in Austria, waited impatiently for action.

Only when the Germans found they were negotiating with a shadow government; that, in fact, the Bolsheviks were already in Kiev and the Rada had fled to Zhitomir, did they order their forces to advance. With them marched the Taras-Shvechenko regiment, Kovalenko, Ooha, and the rest. This time they gave the Don Quixotes a better slogan: They were going to fight the Reds.

FIVE

ATAMAN PREOBRAJENSKY lay in the ash, staring up with unseeing eyes into the star-sprinkled Ukrainian sky. The infuriated Cossacks had ridden away like madmen, having paid the traitor his deserts.

Three days later, Kovalenko and his comrades tethered their horses by the banks of the River Dnieper. They were opposite the Island of Khortytza—their home. "There is nothing for us to do," said Kovalenko, "but to leave the horses here. A few men must look after them until we return."

They had ridden through burning villages without stopping once. They had cut down every force that opposed them, red, white, German, Petlyurian, even those of the Anarchist Makhno. They were fleeing to Khortytza, the historic isle of Cossack freedom.

Revenge burned in Kovalenko's heart against the Germans. "Hey, youngster," he said to the child which he had taken from his native village, the last inhabitant, "can you swim?"

"No," said the child; "but you can make me a raft of reeds and pull me behind you."

"Well, I cannot swim either," Kovalenko growled. "I'll throw my horse in and cling on to her tail, whilst you sit on my shoulders and hold on to my hair. Agreed?"

The child nodded. Bravely he tried to hide his fear of the rushing, tempestuous water. Not far were the waterfalls, the great watery chasm that many years later was to supply life-giving electricity to the whole district. Kovalenko knew the danger. "It's all up to Mazurka," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "if she can dance through the water as well as she can on land, well, we'll be all right."

The little boy nodded his head eagerly. The Cossacks voted to follow Kovalenko's example. "We won't be parted from our horses," they said, "now that we've got them. Let's all go in together, boys!"

They looked at Kovalenko to give the signal. "All right," he said, "get your shoulders under the horses' rumps."

The couple of hundred men edged their horses towards the water,

soothing their whinnies with gentle pats on the nostrils. Kovalenko kissed his mare, Mazurka, demonstratively on the star-shaped patch which illuminated her delicate black head. "Now, Mazurka," he coaxed, "now my beauty, come. I'm only pushing you for a drink. Lift your trotters, lift them, beast. Doesn't the Dnieper smell nice to you. It's a lovely river. Whoa!" He gave a gigantic shove and the horse with a reproachful look backwards which stabbed Kovalenko to his heart, plunged into the water. Vasili leapt in behind her, holding his small companion under his arm like a small sucking-pig. He seized the horse's tail with his free hand and as the frightened animal thrashed the water, so Kovalenko and the child emerged to the surface.

But some of the Cossacks were not so nimble. They pushed the horses in too far and found that the animals were swimming on without them. They yelled and pleaded. But the creatures stared with despair-filled eyes towards the speck of land which was the Island of Khortytza.

A few men were drowned. The turbulent waters carried some down the waterfall. It was no easy adventure. Kovalenko kicked furiously with his legs, imitating his horse, whilst the little boy clung to his hair with the persistence of a louse, shivering so much that he passed water down Kovalenko's neck.

"You are lucky, youngster," Kovalenko shouted, "I have been wanting to do it for a long time."

Mazurka struggled desperately with the current. The life-preserving instincts of the animal saved the man and the child. When they reached the steep shore, the three of them collapsed exhausted in a heap. Women were waiting to minister to the drenched men. Youngsters led away the horses and gave them hay. But all that Kovalenko wanted was to rest. He had managed to swallow a good deal of water in his bath in the Dnieper, and every time he smote himself on the chest, he fetched up pints of water.

SIX

THE German march into the Ukraine began in February, 1918. Their army met with little opposition except from isolated forces of Russians. With the occupation of Kiev by the Germans, the Rada—the separatist Parliament—and the Ukrainian Government, seated themselves comfortably on German bayonets.

General Hoffman, the Commander of the 'Heeresgruppe Kiev', did not hide his dismay. "The difficulty," he said to General Groener, "is that the Central Rada has only our rifles behind it. The moment we withdraw our troops, their authority will collapse at once."

In the meantime, a treaty had been signed with the Rada. Shorn of all diplomatic delicacy, the seventh clause of this treaty stipulated that 'the contracting parties mutually undertake to enter into economic relations without delay and to organize the exchange of goods . . .'

General Groener's task was to see that this clause was carried out. His office, the 'Deutsch-Ukrainische Kaufmannische Wirtschaftsstelle'

(the German-Ukrainian Economic Exchange), drew up a pretty document full of imposing figures. The Rada of the Popular Republic guaranteed to send to Germany and Austria-Hungary a million tons of grain, four hundred million eggs, cattle, totalling in weight forty-six thousand tons, thousands of horses, many truck-loads of coal, manganese, fodder, sugar, lard.

But Ukrainian chickens seemed to revolt at the demands made on their strength and the good mother earth refused to feed the invader. The beautiful yellow corn disappeared as if by magic.

Field-Marshal Eichhorn expressed himself more emphatically to Groener. "The whole trouble is that we have to treat these Ukrainians as a friendly country."

"If we don't," Groener replied, abruptly, "we shall completely destroy the already shaky authority of the Rada."

By the end of March only one train arrived in Vienna with grain. Groener had been promised three hundred.

General Groener summoned Lubinsky, the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was considered to be entirely in the hands of the Germans. "Listen, Lubinsky, don't you think you've painted too rosy a picture of the wealth of your country?"

"But consider the future possibilities!" Lubinsky replied.

The Government and the Rada enjoyed but a small spell of office *after this interview*. By the following July only a fifth of the anticipated amount had been gathered. Hetman Skoropadsky, a more amenable tool, took their place. He endorsed Marshal Eichhorn's order to the Ukrainian population, demanding that they should resume agricultural production to the maximum extent. A bait was set. "The harvest will go to him who ploughs and sows irrespective whether he is the legal owner of the land."

To encourage agriculture, a society calling itself "The Union of Cornraisers" was formed. In April the Germans threw off all pretences and appointed their friend Skoropadsky 'head of the State'.

Of the Pétain of the Ukraine, Marshal Von Ludendorf said: "He was a man with whom one could work well."

Thousands of refugees from other parts of Russia were flocking into the Ukraine. All the rich landowners, officers, princes, and grand dukes hurried to enlist in the Hetman's army. The supplies to Vienna and Berlin grew more regular. They were actually eating white bread there. Rye was good enough for the Ukraine, mixed with sawdust, potato flour, maize, and other handy adulterates.

The German offensive in the spring of 1918 was hailed by Skoropadsky and his colleagues as a proof of German invincibility, and hope stood high. The Hetman and his allies would march on Moscow and throw out the Reds.

But when disaster came to the Germans on the Western Front at the beginning of August, German soldiers grew openly discontented, mutinies broke out in Kharkov. Troops resisted. They refused to be transferred to the West. The soldiers themselves had become speculators. Sending parcels home became an occupation. Contact

with the peasantry humanized the Germans. Worse still, Skoropadsky had no plan to solve the innumerable Agrarian problems which faced the peasantry. There was trouble in his army.

General Von Beck's deduction was that there were too many officers and too few soldiers—especially too few of those soldiers who later turned out to be trustworthy. The peasants began to rise. Many of them were ex-soldiers who had not left their rifles behind. German foraging parties were annihilated. The guerilla forces, representing the people's anger, sprang up everywhere. The Hetman was cursed, resisted, ridiculed.

Factions and roving bands harassed the Hetman and the Germans. A few members of the old Rada came to life. So did Petlyura. Petlyura, the former clerk, turned journalist, now soldier, was more cunning than the rest. He looked to the Entente, to the Treaty of Versailles, to give him immunity.

The German power melted away. Skoropadsky discovered German soldiers had formed themselves into Soviets. He appealed to the White Guards. But it was too late.

Petlyura, fighting the Reds and the Whites and the Germans, occupied Odessa. He was driven out by Russian, Polish, and French detachments. Meanwhile, Skoropadsky had fled with the German baggage-trains.

To add to the confusion the Poles, taking advantage of the civil war, advanced into White Russia and Volhynia.

Petlyura, not content fighting the Red Armies, instituted pogroms against the Jews. January, 1919, marked the greatest massacre of all. More than seventeen thousand persons were killed. The Whites' figure was more modest. They killed five thousand.

The Poles secretly backed Petlyura. The Whites hated him and his band almost as much as the Bolsheviks. Denikin's Volunteer Army and the Petlyurians reached Kiev at about the same time. The east of the city was occupied by the Whites, the south by Petlyura.

Petlyura's flirtation with the Poles earned him the distrust of his Galician regiments. Black typhus decimated his armies. He went over completely to the Poles.

Thousands of other bands roamed the country under so-called free Atamans. Some had the queerest ideology:

'Communism without the Jews.' But in reality it was 'Each man for himself'.

SEVEN

KHORYTSA, the island of freedom, was one of the many islands in the Dnieper. In 1557 the Cossacks sought and obtained from the Polish king authority to build a fortress on the island. The fish caught in its surroundings was said to be as big as small pigs. The dense undergrowth provided natural reserves of moorhens and teal, besides hundreds of varieties of ducks.

It was the Cossacks' paradise for nearly four centuries.

Men who had small right to call themselves Cossacks sought the privileges of Khortytza. In ancient days the character and race of a man was not questioned, be he criminal or prince, he had but to knock at the gates and answer the Hetman's question: "Are you a Christian soul?"

If he replied "Yes" and crossed himself, he passed into the Zaporojhe-Sech. He may be a Tartar or a White Russian or a Moscovite, sometimes even a Caucasian. He was proud to call himself a Zaporojhan.

Vasili Kovalenko was a Cossack of a bare generation's standing. His parents were poor peasants who hired out their labour to the richer men. The rich Cossacks had obtained their land from the Czars as a reward for faithful service. Kovalenko was the first of his family to serve as a Cossack. But he had not been rewarded. The prospect of owning a piece of land, dear to every peasant, was not to be his.

But as Kovalenko sat wringing out his clothes, he had no thoughts either for land or for the future. He was praising God for his escape and swearing that his uniform had been ruined. The men formed themselves into a rough circle and began tearing off their clothes, flinging them like skins on to the bushes. The womenfolk went behind the bushes and threw white billows of towels to the naked men. Now and again the bushes would part. A woman would look at that mass of naked men hoping to find her husband.

The bushes parted and closed often enough without any recognition. But now and again a woman would run out ignoring the protests of the shivering nude Cossacks. Running up to a man, she would fling herself into his arms and embrace him. "Vanka," she would shout. "You here. The devil knows you have changed. What's happened to your beautiful fat stomach? Haven't you been feeding?" Then, flinging her shawl over his shoulders, she would lead him away through the bushes to her temporary home.

Kovalenko started up once or twice, shouted his protests like the other men and began stripping the child and giving him a good rubbing with the coarse, fluffy linen towel. Suddenly the bushes right in front of him parted as if by a sudden storm and an enormous fat woman with bosoms that rotated in her blouse like locomotives' wheels, emerged. She flung herself on Kovalenko with a hard, piercing shriek. Then, seeing the child's head bobbing up under the towel, she plucked him up by one arm and grabbed the two of them to her copious breast. "My darlings, my dear ones. Vaska, Vassinka, Vassuninka. Mishka." She kept pronouncing the two beloved names.

"Now, Maruska, Maruska," said Kovalenko harshly. He pushed her away from him and darted to the bushes. There the family reunion took place. For a while they could not speak. They did not know which questions to ask first. Both of them looked at the child.

"Is that Mishka?" Kovalenko asked dubiously, pulling the child's long black hair to one side. "Why, the devil take me. I'd never recognize him. And the little mouse told us that he was called Mitka."

"But he was two when you left," his wife pleaded. "He was a baby. The Germans came into the village to pinch our grain. We refused. We hadn't enough for our children, Vaska. They herded us out and set our houses on fire. Some of the pretty girls they took away with them. The rest of us fled. Mishka here was playing in the fields. I went out looking for him. But it was too late. The Germans had thrown cordons round our village. It was certain death to remain. But I refused to go. If it wasn't for our neighbours, I would never have left. They dragged me away with them."

"What of Pyotr?" Kovalenko interrupted tenderly. He took the woman's arm and completely oblivious of his nudity walked happily with her into the market-place. Women screamed, young girls giggled. Maruska took off one of her frocks, quite unabashed, and handed it to her husband. He put it on sheepishly and followed her into an *isba*.

The room was almost bare except for the stove, table, and a long wooden bench. It had been given to Maruska by the elders. They felt some responsibility towards a Cossack's wife. "Not like our home, but still a home!" she apologized. "Sit down, I'll get your clothes and then make something to eat for you."

"Tell me one thing: where is Pyotr? How is he? And Olga and Many? Are they out working? Why don't you say anything?"

"They are all right," she assured him. "I am certain, they are all right. Olga is in Moscow. Pyotr in Kiev. And Many, she is a nurse."

"With whose forces?"

"The Reds, of course. She is a Communist. Most of us are Communists here. We've had enough of Petlyura and his gang and the others."

Kovalenko scratched his head. "Who are the Communists?" he said. "You know, being away so long . . . a lot of things have changed. And look at you! Where did you get that big scar?"

"Oh, that," his wife said, pointing to the long jagged cut which stretched from her forehead across the side of her face to her neck. "That's a present I got from a White Guard before I killed him."

"Don't say you've been fighting!"

"Of course. We all have. How do you think we got to Khortytza? The men made pikes for us. Two hundred from our village fought our way here. Sometimes we marched as much as twenty miles a day."

Kovalenko looked admiringly at his wife. "And to think all I thought you were good for was a featherbed!" he said. "Maruska, I'd wring the entrails out of that man who gave you that stab."

"Don't worry. I threw him with a pitchfork over my shoulder like a bundle of hay."

"Fine," said Kovalenko. "Fine." His eyes looked hungrily round the room. "What is there to eat?"

"Some bread and sausage. And fish-soup if you like it. We have it here every day."

"Fish-soup!" Kovalenko bounded up.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"To call Ooha and Dimitrie, two of my friends."

"You can't go like that through the street! Sit down! Who are these friends of yours? Are they good men?"

"They are good fighters," Kovalenko answered. "You go down, Maruska, and fetch my clothes and call out for Ooha and Dimitri. Tell them, there is soup and sausage waiting for them. They'll soon come."

While Maruska was away Kovalenko fondled Mishka. "You are tired, my knight. Come, let me put you to bed."

The boy scowled.

"I am hungry," he protested.

"Oh, you will get your sausage. Don't worry. I am proud of you. You behaved like a real Cossack's son. One day you will be a general. Watch my word. You will ride in a beautiful car and give orders."

The small child was not very interested in the prophecy. Overcome by fatigue and hunger, he began to cry. Kovalenko raised him to his shoulder, but the child drew back in horror. "We are not going into the water?" he screamed, "are we?"

"No, no," his father soothed him, lifting him up to the top of the stove. The bricks were warm and inviting. He decided to lie down beside the child and soothe his fears. But he had barely done so when Maruska, close followed by Ooha and Dimitri, entered the room.

"A fine lot of friends you have!" Maruska protested. "I shouted out there was sausage and fish-soup for your two friends and twenty men all said they were Ooha and Dimitri. Which of these lads are your friends?"

Kovalenko looked at the hungry faces of the men. "Maruska," he said in a whisper. "How much sausage have we got?"

"About ten pounds," she replied. "It must last us a month."

"Never mind about a month! Let's have a feast. What do you say, boys? Let's have a feast."

The idea was taken up with alacrity. The men did not await a second invitation. They streamed into the room and began seating themselves on the small bench. When that was crowded they sat around on the floor. Ooha and Dimitri jumped up on to the stove and began to sing. Maruska, furious at her husband's invitation, folded her hands: "I cannot feed all these pigs," she said. "There is soup for about ten of you. Which of you are Communists?"

The men looked at each other.

"Good," she said, "no one will have the sausage."

The men hurriedly voted themselves as Communists there and then. "That's better," Maruska coaxed. "The priests used to save your souls by giving you whiffs of incense. I'll make you Communists with sausage. The first thing you've got to learn is to share. You are all poor as church mice, but that doesn't matter. Don't be greedy. Be patient!"

She brought out five enormous sausages—they were almost as

thick as her own arms—and laid them down invitingly in the centre of the table. "Not yet!" she said, "not until you give me a pledge. If you are going to live here—and you look as if you will," she grumbled, "you will have to decide which of you will fish to-morrow and which of you will hunt. I haven't food in this house for twenty men."

"All right!"

"Now cut yourselves a slice. One slice, to begin with."

The men dutifully passed round the sausage and cut themselves off a small slice. They felt like good little boys. "And you, Ooha, here is some ooha for you!" Maruska slapped a whole basin-full of grey soup into a wooden bowl and handed it to Ooha. He smelt it like a connoisseur and closed his eyes, slowly waving his nose over the steam.

"The mother of God has sent you," he said. "What fish is this?"

"Tiddlers," someone suggested.

"It's perch."

The men had barely begun their meal when their peace was disturbed by cries and shouts outside the *isba*. Kovalenka, who had dressed in the meantime, rushed out. The men looked anxiously at each other. They pressed the remaining bits of sausage into their mouths and chewed hard. By the time Kovalenko returned, they were already waiting for the news.

"We are being attacked," he said. "About fifty rowing boats are approaching. The elders have ordered all the able-bodied men out. Come on, lads. Pick up your sabres!"

The men trooped out obediently. Their first thought was for their horses. Kovalenko ordered them into file. "Horses are no use in fighting on the shore. I suggest we creep into the gully over there. And if any of the boats try to sail up, we'll sabre them from both sides."

The men leapt to their posts. It had already grown dark. The white mist of the river floated in trailing wisps over the surface of the water. Except for the splash of oars, the whole of Khortytza was silent. The Cossacks were at their battle stations. Their eyes, grown accustomed to the darkness, they waited with beating hearts for the enemy.

Suddenly they heard a man shouting. The rowing boats were already approaching the gully where Kovalenko and his men lay hidden. "Comrades," the man shouted, "we are friends. Let us pass!"

No answer. "It's probably a trick," Kovalenko whispered to Ooha. "Get your swords ready now. As they pull up take the heads off their shoulders."

A man leapt out of a boat. It was the signal for his companions to disembark. Kovalenko raised his sword and was just about to take an enormous smite when he froze in his action. "Grishka!" he shouted. "Boys, this is Grishka. Drop your swords. Who are you with, Grishka? The Whites? Petlyura? Or the Reds?"

"We are Red Partisans," Grishka answered, not recognizing

Kovalenko for a moment. "Let us pass, Cossacks, we have business with you."

EIGHT

THE Cossacks lowered their Mausers. Kovalenko heard men's boots scraping on the gravel. When the boats had pulled in and turned over on the shore, he approached Grishka and said: "So, have you come to join the Zaporozhians?"

Grishka went up to Kovalenko and stared in his face: "Vaska," he exclaimed, "friend. I am happy to see you. We thought for a moment that you were White Cossacks."

"We are just Cossacks," Kovalenko corrected him. "My, you look dirty."

Grishka's face was heavily caked with mud. His clothes looked more like stiff cardboard. "Distribute your men round the camp, we'll look after them. And you come into the *isba* with me. There is only my old woman and child. We can talk there."

When Grishka entered the hut unannounced, he stumbled over a ledge and sprawled right on to the floor. "What devil is this?" asked Maruska, seizing the bench, preparing to give him a crack over the head. Little Mishka cowered behind an enormous feather quilt.

"He is a friend," Kovalenko explained. "No need to be afraid of him. Come, Maruska. Put the bench down and give him some food. This is Grishka Georgovitch Malenko."

Grishka sat up and rubbed his shins. "Sorry," he apologized, grinning broadly, "but we have been lying in the swamps for the last two weeks. I don't suppose I smell very appetizingly."

"Never mind, never mind. Don't apologize," Maruska waved aside his explanations. "Naked men have been running about this place for most of the day. Come on, slip off your trousers. You look as sticky as the devil."

"Come on," said Kovalenko. They stripped Grishka of his clothes.

The boy in the meanwhile grew bolder. He put aside his quilt and introduced himself: "I am Mishka," he said; "who are you?"

Grishka went over to the boy and lifted him off the stove. "My, you are a handsome lad!" Seeing the child was naked, he pulled him by his big toe. "You resemble your father in your big toe," he said seriously. "Remember how we used to tie rags round our legs to keep them warm in Austria?"

"Yes," said Kavalenko, "I remember. It looks as if we'll be doing the same again very soon. The Germans burnt down our village. The devil knows how I got here. Some of our lads were drowned. But still. . . ."

Maruska brought in a large steaming bowl of water. "Hop into the oven," she told him. "There is some *khlysty* there. Vaska can beat you. I expect a rubbing will do you good."

Vaska pulled aside the stove's shutter and the two men entered, dragging behind them the bowl of water. "My, it's as hot as hell. But it's pleasant," said Grishka, pulling off his clothes.

After a few minutes' thorough washing, the caked dirt melted away and revealed Grishka's natural skin. Kovalenko was sweating profusely. "I'll take my clothes off, too," he said. "It won't do me any harm. And then I'll liven up your circulation. But tell me, what brought you here to the Cossacks?"

He picked up a broom of green twigs and began belabouring Grishka's back. "Ooh," he yelled, "have mercy on me. I am not a penitent. Lay about me more gently."

Kovalenko roared with laughter. "I see you are not used to it. Come on, you beat me!"

Grishka picked up the twigs willingly and set about castigating his friend. "It's like this. I and my detachment of Kiev workers were driven out a month ago by Petlyura and the Whites. We were trying to make our way towards Tsaritsyn, and join up with the main armies."

"What main armies? What's Tsaritsyn got to do with it? Have the Germans got so far?"

"No, not the Germans, but the Whites!"

"And who are they?"

"They are the landlords and princes. People who have held the peasants' land, who have exploited the workers, who have made our wives grow old before their time. They have invited foreign armies to fight against us. They are the people who have kept our peasants ignorant, who have doled out superstition to keep us from revolting. That's who they are, Vaska. We are against them."

Kovalenko scratched his bare back. "And who are 'we,' may I ask?"

"We are the people," Grishka answered. "People like you and me. People who were driven to war and slaughtered like cattle. Who weren't given arms. We are the new people who are going to take possession of their own land, who are going to work together to build up a better life where there will be bread and land and work for everyone. That's what Lenin says!"

"Oh, he does," said Kovalenko, who would not admit that he did not know who Lenin was.

"And who is Lenin? Is that what you want to ask?" said Grishka.

"Why should I? He is a Cossack. I have heard of him. You know I can read and write. Lenin is a Cossack. Who else but a Cossack would say that the people ought to have land? Aren't I right?"

"Well, you are nearly right," said Grishka. "Lenin is a Cossack. He is also a worker. He is a general. He is a clerk, he is all of us."

"You don't mean he is God?" asked Kovalenko, awestruck.

"No, I don't mean that at all. I mean that he is a man who leads us."

"That's the first I've heard of it. Who appointed him?"

"The Peasant and Workers' Party. The Communist Party. The Bolshevik Party."

"Are they all the same or are they like a Trinity?" asked Kovalenko slyly.

"They are like the Trinity," said Grishka patiently. "Now, do you understand?"

"Yes," said Kovalenko; "they want to give the peasants land, the workers some work. What about people like me who can read and write? What do we get?"

"Well," said Grishka, "what about it? To each according to his need, from each according to his labour."

"Sounds like a bit out of the gospel to me. Where did Lenin find it?"

"Lenin didn't find it. The common people found it. That's the only way to live, don't you agree?"

"I might," said Kovalenko. "But what are you leading up to? You are leading up to something, aren't you?"

"Well," said Grishka, "it's this: I am a leader of partisans and I have come to the Zaparozhe to ask the Cossacks to join us. Alone we cannot fight through to Tsaritsyn, together we will be able to join the Red Guard there and hold up Denikin's advance."

"Who is Denikin? Sounds like a Cossack name to me."

"It is. He is the White General. He has recruited your brothers of the Don. They will be fighting to take the Donetz out of our hands, to rob miners like myself from producing coal."

"What does he want to do that for? Why do the Don Cossacks follow him? You've got to work the same as we have. It isn't reasonable. I'll speak to the boys. Maruska," he yelled, "call the lads to the *isba*. Tell the elders to summon the Sech. Kovalenko wants to speak to them."

"Fine," said Grishka, "but don't go out without your trousers. It's difficult to talk politics without your trousers."

The two men dressed hurriedly. Steam was coming out of their clothes as they went outside. Maruska had run to the elders' hut and put her husband's proposition before the grey-beards. They weren't very disposed to stir, but she lifted up their bench and sent them scattering to the floor. "You she-devil," they roared, "have you no respect for our old bones?"

Maruska fled in the disorder and hollered into the night. "Cossacks, to the Sech." A fierce rattling of arms was heard. Men were beginning to pour out of their huts, carrying enormous flaming torches. Soon about a thousand men were gathered in the square. All arguing, all demanding to know what the new state of emergency was about.

When Kovalenko appeared they gave him a cheer. They were already getting bored, already thinking of their horses, of a war to fight in, of some place to be brave.

"Boys," said Kovalenko, standing on an enormous barrel full of sour apples, "there is a General Denikin who won't let the miners

work. And there is a man called Lenin who says the land should belong to the peasants. Now you are not all Cossacks here, I know that. But most of you are pretending to be. You are a lot of empty pants. You haven't a yard of earth to call your own. And you Cossacks, who have land, the Germans have robbed you of that. They are stealing grain, burning your villages. And then there is a man called Lenin and he says the ground should be ours, that we all ought to work. We are called upon to fight for the trinity. Now what man among you wouldn't fight for the trinity, I'd crack his skull."

"No, no," Grishka remonstrated, taking him at the elbow.

But Kovalenko had summoned up steam and was not going to be deterred by a small technicality. "Cossacks, Zaporozhens, to horse. Bring out your bays, your mares, take out your swords and sharpen them. To-morrow we move towards Tsaritsyn, every man of you."

"What about the women?" a voice cried. It was Maruska.

"The women can walk," said Kovalenko. "We need our spare horses' backs for the baggage. The women can cook and nurse us. What do you say?"

Loud cheers came from the men. But there were one or two dissenting voices. "I want to go back to Dagestan," said Dimitri Mudry, who had come out with a long dagger on which mutton had been spitted.

"What do we want to go to Tsaritsyn for?" another voice proclaimed. "Why can't we fight in the Ukraine?"

"You can," Grishka replied for Kovalenko. "But it's no good us fighting in little bits and pieces. We must unite. At Tsaritsyn stands the great Red Army. We must join up with them. Or, if we can gather enough men, we can constitute ourselves into a separate force and harry the rear of the Whites."

"But who are we fighting?" Ooha, who had been silent up till now, demanded. "It's good to know who you are fighting."

"We are fighting," Grishka replied, "all the bandits who are ranged against the People's power. Whites, Petlyurians, Germans."

"But if we cross over the Dnieper," another voice said, "we will be in the land of the Don Cossacks. Who are the Don Cossacks fighting with?"

Grishka realized his difficulty. He was about to reply when Kovalenko cut him short. "Brothers," he shouted, "the Don Cossacks are against the trinity. They have been deceived by the antichrist. We must rescue them, we must crack their heads and make them see sense. You understand?"

Everybody pretended to understand. "We'll bring them over on to our side, never fear. I'll ride up to their Ataman himself and challenge him to a duel. If I win, he'll send the Cossacks to our side. If I lose, you can go over to him!"

Grishka sighed. "Well," he said to himself, "they'll learn their politics as they campaign. The great thing is to have them in the field against the Whites."

NINE

THE trek of the Zaporozhians into enemy territory began the next morning at dawn. All the able-bodied male and female population prepared to leave on enormous rafts and the rowing boats which Grishka had brought.

It was October. The autumn was still mellow. The branches of the ash trees were bare except for their tips where hung great bronze bunches of leaves. The cranberry bushes burned in the rays of the autumn sun like rubies. It was sad parting, but the Cossacks had decided on a new life.

The horses were brought out from their stables. They had been fed for the last time on good bran and not the usual hay. Every effort would be made to conserve their strength. It was a good four hundred miles to go before they reached the Don country.

A few of the elders were against the trek. The island of Khortytza would be left unprotected, they said. But what did that matter? If peace was not restored in the Ukraine, the island of Khortytza would have little chance to hold out against the birds of death which flew in the sky.

The Cossacks had seen the few bombers attached to the White General's armies. There were not many of them but they could cause devastation at the most unexpected times. "We will not be trapped like rats," said Kovalenko. "We will fight them on our native plains. We'll show them what a Cossack blade can do."

The men were eager to confer the title of Ataman on Kovalenko. But he refused. "There are leaders and led. But there must be no distinction between them. The old names must go. The Whites use them. Isn't that what old man Lenin would say?" he asked Grishka.

An enormous raft had been fitted out to take the horses and the women. The *isbas* were cleaned out. The Cossacks took as few of their belongings as they could. "Never mind," they said, "we may return, and be glad of the things we left behind. And if not, well, other Cossacks will come and they can use them." Maruska even left a pound of sausage and some bread in the cupboard for any unexpected visitors who might chance to come to Khortytza.

She and her husband had debated the wisdom of taking Mishka with them. But what could they do? They couldn't leave him alone on the island with the greybeards as company. And danger, after all, was everywhere. He was fitted out with a little improvised Cossack uniform and a shaggy little horse, and told to behave like a soldier. During the river crossing he was set in charge over the melons. "Whenever the men are thirsty, you will throw them one," he was told. He felt as important as an ataman.

The crossing was well organized. Kovalenko sent his heftiest men to fight the currents with their enormous wooden oars. He sent the horses and the women over in a convoy surrounded by rowing

boats. A few of the men who had guns held them ready-cocked. The armada moved over as soon as the sun had risen in the heavens.

When they reached the bank, they took up fighting stations. Grishka's band of two hundred men constituted the infantry. The Cossacks rode on the flanks, and in the vanguard. As they passed through the villages, hundreds of men came to join them. So many, in fact, that Kovalenko began wondering whether he had enough food and arms.

But the men came with home-made pikes, scythes, and pitch-forks, and they sprinkled them amongst Grishka's infantry. "Never mind, boys," Kovalenko told them, "you will get rifles. But you will have to win them. You will have to tear them out of the hands of the enemies. They've got plenty of Mausers. Don't be impatient, the wind of battle will soon be whistling in your ears."

The infantry was a tattered lot, starved and without boots. Many of the men wanted to take their wives with them but Kovalenko sternly forbade it. "We've got ours in our baggage," he told them, "because they haven't a village to stay in. Leave your wives here. We'll protect them. The Cossacks of the Zaporozhe give you their word."

During the march, Kovalenko noticed that Ooha had dismounted and given his horse to a lame comrade. He also saw that he was marching with his arm round another man. "What's the matter, Ooha?" he called. "Feeling sea-sick?"

He looked down at Ooha's companion, but the person immediately thrust his shaggy sheepskin hat down over his eyes. "What's he to you, Ooha? A brother?" asked Kovalenko jealously. "You should be riding at my side."

Ooha did not reply for a moment. "He is a young Cossack I found in the last village. Fedka is his name."

"Well, Fedka," said Kovalenko, "are you a Cossack?"

The man did not answer him. Vasili snapped the big hat from off his head with a skilful crack of the whip. Long golden tousled curls fell out.

"So," Kovalenko whistled, "this is your cousin Fedka. What's he growing his hair so long for? Going to be a priest? Come on, take off your jacket."

The girl, instead of obeying the order, folded her arms over her breast. "I thought so," said Kovalenko. "What were my orders, Ooha? No women!"

"But you've got Maruska," Ooha complained. He looked at his friend defiantly, and tightened his grasp round the girl's shoulder. "Fenja here, she is an orphan. Someone must look after her. Besides, she has promised to act as nurse."

"To whom? You?"

"To the men. Let her stay, chief. She knows how to dress a wound."

"Has she got cool hands?"

"Oh yes, commander." The girl held out her hands. "I've been

nursing the partisans for the last year. Only I am afraid to stay. They say the Whites are approaching. Can I join your army?"

Kovalenko thought for a moment and then intentionally reared his horse. "Why not? But see that you make yourself useful!" He rode away.

Kovalenko was a natural leader. The men accepted his authority without grumbling. For a whole week they marched without encountering the enemy. Only when they reached Yozovo did they hear sounds of battle.

"We need a standard," Kovalenko said. "What shall it be, Grishka?"

"There is only one," the miner replied. "Tear off the first blood-stained shirt that you find from one of our comrade's backs and put it on a pole. That's our standard."

"Queer standard," said Kovalenko. "I would have liked something worked out in gold and silver. Say a dove and old man Lenin. Well, you know best."

Occasional gun-shots punctuated his conversation. "I think I'll send scouts out," Kovalenko said.

They came across bodies of men lying sprawled on the ground. They turned one over but found no identifying marks. Nearby a hat lay. Kovalenko picked it up with the tip of his sabre. He gazed at the five-pointed Red Star. "One of our boys," said Grishka simply.

"Dimitri, Ooha," Kovalenko called. "Take the right and the left flanks. Grishka, scatter your men on either side of the road. We'll advance in open formation."

TEN

GENERAL DENKIN had entrusted his Don Cossack army with the important task of cutting a wedge between Voronezh and Tsaritsyn in the direction of Povorino. This force disposed of about fifty-two thousand men. Facing them stood the eighth, ninth, and tenth Red Armies. The White offensive carried them in the direction of Voronezh. But the Red soldiers fought stubbornly, despite appalling losses, and slowly forced back the Whites towards the Don.

It was Kovalenko and men like him, commanders of odd partisan armies that played an important rôle in turning the retreat of the Don Cossacks into a rout.

But for the presence of the White Volunteer Army in the North Caucasus and its bases in the Black Sea through which supplies from France and Britain poured in, the battle for the Donetsk Basin would have been finished by the end of 1918.

In the meantime, Kovalenko's brigade, which had swollen up to two thousand men, was preparing to strike the Whites in the rear at Lugansk. He did not know that he was in reality sandwiched between the Don Cossack army and the Volunteer Army that was coming up from the south to reinforce the Whites.

On 8th January, 1919, Denikin took supreme command, assuming the title of Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces in the south of Russia.

"Now," said Kovalenko to his men, "is the time for you to find your weapons and eternal glory." When Kovalenko gave the order to attack, he imagined he was striking in the rear of the Don Army. In reality, he was performing suicide. He was sending two thousand men to fight the Volunteer Army numbering nearly twenty thousand men.

The Whites seemed also to be completely surprised by the attack. Their scouts had reported that they were contacting the retreating Don Army, but when Kovalenko drove his men through the narrow corridor which still separated the two white armies, they imagined that the Reds had crossed the River Donetz and were trying to surround the remnants of the scattered Don Cossack forces.

The Whites set down a tremendous artillery barrage. Grishka's infantry could not move. Every time they raised their heads, machine-guns brought down a number of men. The women lay huddled in the rear that was no rear, but threatened every moment to become the front. Maruska armed herself with a carving-knife and was more fearsome to the women-folk than to the army. "If any one of you squeals or tries to run away," she warned them, "I shall stick this into your fat behinds. Stay where you are."

The women meekly put shawls over their heads and burrowed themselves in the hay-cart.

Kovalenko ordered Dimitri's right wing to attack. The Cossacks rose in their stirrups and shouted. Flashing past Kovalenko, they swung their sabres in the air to show him just exactly how they would behave when they contacted the enemy. Very soon riderless horses appeared.

It was no use wasting men: Kovalenko decided on a stratagem. He sent Ooha forward to draw the enemy's cavalry. A few hundred men he was prepared to sacrifice. The task was not an easy one. After all, the Whites might not feel disposed to match cavalry with cavalry, but would use their machine-guns instead.

Ooha and his men rode out bravely. But before they had crossed the ridge where the White emplacements lay, shells began to burst under their feet. "Horses against artillery!" Kovalenko swore. "The oowards. Why don't they send their horses? We'll show it to them. Well," he turned round to Grishka, "there is nothing for it. We'll have to capture their guns."

Grishka said nothing. Kovalenko saw that blood was pouring out of his shoulder. "Been scratched?" he said. "There is a girl back there. She is supposed to be a nurse. See her, she'll bandage you up."

"It doesn't matter," Grishka answered brusquely. "Give me a horse. It's the first time I have ever ridden. But our only hope lies in capturing those guns."

The general charge was ordered. The infantry was to follow on

both sides, so as to leave the centre open for the cavalry and its retreat if necessary. The animals snorted in anticipation of the battle. Swords were pulled out. Kovalenko moved to the head of the long line of Cossacks.

"Lads," he said, "leave Denikin to me. Now go and split their gizzards."

The horsemen began to charge. The horses' hooves were muffled with rags so that the Whites in the general confusion did not think that they would be so foolhardy as to charge down the road. Kovalenko's cavalry cut through the middle of the ridge and surrounded the artillery. He himself used his sabre as another man may twirl a stick. First he thrust, then he cut, then he simply used it as a battering ram. The gunners died like flies.

Suddenly the White cavalry appeared and behind them came a great serpentine armoured train. It poured a devastating fire into Kovalenko's brigade, mowing his men down as well as the remaining White gunners. But the battle was unequal. In three hours, Kovalenko and some three hundred men were captured. But they had put out of condition more than twenty heavy guns.

Kovalenko was bound with a rope and hauled before the interrogation officer. "What are you fighting us for?" the officer demanded. "Who are you?"

"Red Partisans," Kovalenko said carelessly, "who do you think we are?"

"What part of the front did you break through?"

"We didn't break through anywhere. We marched down on your flank."

"How many of you?"

"How many with me? Only two thousand. But behind me there is the whole of the Ukraine and behind the Ukraine there are the Red Armies and behind them there is Lenin and behind him there is the Trinity. There are millions of us. That's how many of us there are! And if your fine General Denikin measured swords with me, I'd make a deal with you."

The officer was astonished at this insolence. "You mean to tell me," he said, "you dared to make a frontal attack on an army more than ten times your size? You must be mad. Are you a Bolshevik?"

"Ask Lenin. Don't you know them? I'm a Cossack fighting for our land. What are you doing here? You sound like a Moscovite."

The officer slashed him across the face with his whip. "You are not here to ask me questions," he said. "I am instructed to convey these alternatives to you and your men. You either join our forces immediately or you are shot. You have till dawn to make up your minds."

Kovalenko was taken back to the remnants of his brigade. Many of them were badly wounded. He recognized Fenja. The first thing he asked her was whether she had seen his comrade, the miner Grishka.

Fenja raised her flaxen curls which she no longer bothered to hide under the heavy Cossack shako. Her hands were covered with blood,

but she nimbly tore up bandages with her teeth to prevent her staining them. She shook her head. "There are only three hundred men here," she said. "I have only one pair of hands. Otherwise I'd go and look out for him."

The men gathered round Kovalenko. "You've had an offer," he told them. "You either go over to the Whites or you are shot. That's the choice you are given and you must make up your minds before dawn." The hungry men stared at each other.

Suddenly they were jostled by their guards. "Attention!" a voice shouted.

The men grouped themselves behind Kovalenko. A Cossack officer stepped forward. "A fine bunch of cut-throats," he sneered, "you and your Lenin. Now listen, you dogs. I've come here to help you make up your mind. I am going to shoot every tenth man of you—that will make you think quicker. Now, what is it to be? With Denikin—or in the graveyard? You there," he pointed to Kovalenko, "you are the leader of these rascals. Make them speak!"

"Well, lads, he's made the offer and he is shooting one in ten of us to make an example. Now perhaps we can see what we are up against." He left this ambiguous question in the air.

"Quite," said the officer, "it should now be obvious to you. Resist and we'll burn every one of your villages. We'll remember your names, never fear, and the places you come from. Sergeant, count out your men!"

"Stop!" said Kovalenko, stepping forward. "I'm the first volunteer. There are three hundred of us here. You need another twenty-nine."

"All right," the officer agreed, "makes no difference to us. Only you, Mr. Commander, you are too precious. Come on, your chief says thirty of you are willing to volunteer. Let's see if you got any guts in you."

A few men stepped forward immediately. Others came up until the whole three hundred stood in line.

"Dramatics," the officer sneered. "I only want thirty." The men shrugged their shoulders and began talking in a low voice amongst themselves.

"No," Ooha was saying to Dimitri, "not you. You've got ten wives in Daghestan. I am an orphan. What does it matter to me if I die."

Fenja, who was kneeling beside a wounded man, finished her bandaging and came to Ooha's side. "I volunteer," she said.

Ooha and Fenja were the first two to step forward. The men still talked amongst themselves.

"Come on, make up your minds," the officer ordered.

Twenty-eight men finally sorted themselves out. They were the ones who claimed they had the least to lose by losing their lives. They had no wives, no parents, or, perhaps, they were just men who were prepared to be martyred, although most of them were merely volunteering to save the lives of the others.

Kovalenko raged that he was refused. But the officer silenced him with the butt of his pistol, hitting him squarely across the jaw when he protested.

When Fenja bent down to help him, he pushed her aside with his foot. "I thought you were volunteering to die with your sweetheart," he said.

Fenja, casting a glance at Kovalenko, saw that he was not badly hurt. She rose up immediately and went to Ooha's side. The sentries came up with bayonets and separated the victims from the other prisoners.

Kovalenko stirred. "Sing," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "sing, Cossacks."

The men began to sing; those that were being led off and those that stayed behind. Mischievously, almost contemptuously, they began to pour out with a strong baritone voice:

"Heavily hangs the rye
Bent to the trampled ground;
While brave men fighting die
Through blood the horses bound.

Under the white birch-tree
A Cossack bold is slain—
They lift him tenderly
Into the ruined grain.

Someone has borne him there,
Someone has put in place
A scarlet cloth, with prayer,
Over the up-turned face."

ELEVEN

FENJA held on to Ooha's arm. They marched at the head of the column. It was already too dark to see each other's faces. Nobody knew how long they had been sweethearts; perhaps it was a day. Perhaps they met many years ago. Now death would bridge all time for them. Love was sharpened, the love that always grows exquisite with parting.

They knew there were only a few more minutes now. They could have spoken. But words would have been an impediment to their thoughts that mingled ecstatically and swiftly.

"I shall stand in front of him," Fenja thought. "So that the bullets which kill me can pass into him. There will only be bare seconds, no less than that, difference."

She deliberately pulled his hand up to her face. "Feel," she said quietly, "I am smiling."

Ooha felt her face with his rough hand, navigated his fingers over the bridge of her nose to her mouth. It was drawn but not trembling. She kissed his hand.

"It's a pity," said Ooha philosophically. "A great pity. I am sure you could have made pies very beautifully."

The White Guards pulled back their safety catches and fired blindly into the mass. Fenja sprang forward to cover Ooha with her body. He tried desperately to pull her aside, but it was too late. They fell at that volley. They fell face to face.

TWELVE

THE women who had been caught in the hay carts were sent to the men. There was a double purpose in this. The White Guards had told them of the fate awaiting their men if they refused to join Denikin's army. More than that: they threatened the women with the same fate.

Maruska found Kovalenko nursing his jaw and muttering savagely. "Well," she said, "they have caught us like cattle."

"It's all my fault," Kovalenko exclaimed, pulling her down to him. "Where is Mishka?"

"How do I know? You gave him a horse. The little beggar rode off on his own. It's as well. Poor little orphan."

"We are not dead yet," Kovalenko said between his teeth. "Do they think they are going to shoot me like a bear?"

"A lot you can do. They've got machine-guns on all sides. I saw them as they passed me through to the camp. They have been talking to us women."

"I suppose . . ." said Kovalenko.

Maruska nodded her head.

"That's bad. Nothing weakens a man more. We should have left you women behind."

"We'll rather die with our men," she replied.

"You mean it?" Kovalenko's eyes glittered. "Maruska, you are a real Bolshevik although the devil knows what it means. But Grishka kept on saying that. If anything went well, he used to say to me: 'You are a real Bolshevik.' So I say that to you. What about cheering the men up with a song? They stopped singing since they heard the volley."

"I'll dance for them," Maruska volunteered. "I am so fat, it's bound to make them laugh."

Kovalenko began to clap. Maruska, flinging her arms out, slipped into the middle and began twirling around as best she could with her fifteen stone.

The Cossacks, a little surprised by the sight, but immensely cheered, joined in the clapping. The White Guards looking on thought they were mad. "But you are condemned to death," they told them. "What are you so cheerful about? Come over to us. We'll give you food and new uniforms and horses."

"That's what they said to us in Austria," Kovalenko yelled through the noise.

Maruska's dancing did not really succeed in lifting the atmosphere.

It merely aggravated it. The men stopped clapping and lay back. Kovalenko folded one knee over the other as he lay looking up at the sky. "I suppose I might as well enjoy my last thoughts on earth," he said to himself. "But what is there to enjoy?"

"Our children are all right," he said to his wife. "Manja is in Moscow. I am sure she is a nurse or a fighter like Fenja was. And Pyotr is in Kiev. I wonder what he is doing with himself."

"Oh, he will be in the front line," his wife replied. "Never you fear."

"And Mishka, he is scampering over the plains on his little horse. I wonder how many Whites he thinks he can kill with his little sword."

"You know, there is not much point in thinking about these things. Life wasn't bad. It was hard. We rarely had enough food to eat. And there were all these continual wars. My father died liberating the Bulgarians from the Turks. I don't mind that. But what are we dying for now, Vaska? Can you tell me that?"

Kovalenko looked pityingly at his wife. He was certain she had not heard the conversation he had had with Grishka in the oven when the miner had explained to him something of the mysteries that were going on around them. "We are dying for ourselves, that's who we are dying for."

"What do you mean, for ourselves? How can we die for ourselves?"

"Very simply. We belong to the people, don't we? The new people that are going to take possession of their own land, who are going to work together to build up a better life. That's what Lenin says. He says many clever things, Maruska. But there is not enough time to tell you everything. Besides," he said, "you never learned to read and write as I did. It would be difficult."

"Oh, you are a wise one," Maruska answered, a little offended at her husband's superiority. "But at this moment I am thinking whether all the men here are willing to die for what Lenin says."

"Of course they are," Kovalenko snorted. "We all took an oath as Red Partisans to fight until the ground was cleared of the Whites and their friends, an oath is an oath."

"So you refuse to join the Whites?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, that's all right. If you die, I'll die with you. I am getting a little tired of carrying fifteen stone around. Perhaps I will be lighter in heaven. Perhaps I will have wings to carry myself about. Do you think there are thin and fat angels in heaven, Vaska?"

"It's just how it strikes the Lord's fancy. He'll put a pair of wings on you if he wants to have a good laugh."

"But if I ask Him that I'd like to be thin. You think He'd refuse? Just for a little while, say a few thousand years?"

The same scene was being repeated between the other husbands and wives. The bachelors sat apart feeling very lonely. Dimitri Mudry, the Caucasian, tried to tell them a few anecdotes, but they couldn't understand his Caucasian humour. "You know," he said,

"the Sultan Klich Hirei Shaham, Hereditary Prince of the Adigis, is raising an army to help the Whites. He says that Mohammed came to him in the night and said: 'Son of the Khan, Allah wants you to wage a Holy War. Tell the faithful.' You know what he promised all who join? He promised each man a flock of twenty mares and a hundred sheep. And he'd give us swords inscribed with our names. He is even offering seven wives apiece. I've got ten already. So what could seven more be to me? But the son of the Khan is a dog. The son of the Khan hopes to get a reward. He is calling on all the Abrecks, all the fighters in the hills, trying to set them one against the other. Why can't people live quietly in their valleys? We are tired of war. When the White officer spoke to me just now I said I'd die with the infidels."

"Boys," said Kovalenko, "Denikin has asked for an answer. Scratch your heads. Do you remember how Akhmet the Third, the Sultan of Constantinople, wrote to our forefathers, and how we answered him? Well, let's sing the same answer to the Whites. They'll guess its meaning."

The Cossacks began singing their answer:

"In the year 1600, in that God's year,
A letter came from Akhmet
To our Zaporogie:

I, Sultan, the son of Mohammed,
The grandson of the one God,
The brother of the Crescent
And even of the Sun;
Knight strong and great,
King of Kings,
Champion of all the world
And Tzar of Tzars:
Tzar of Constantinople,
Tzar of Macedonia,
Greece, Serbia, Moldavia;
Tzar of Babylon, Podolia and Halych,
And glorious Crimea;
Tzar of Egypt, Arabia, Jerusalem,
The Keeper of the Tomb of Jerusalem
And of your God;
I am the Sorrow and the Help
Of all Christian men—
I say to ye, Cossacks,
Surrender!
Or expect no good from me.

In the same year the Zaporofians
Read the letter
And said to their foe, the Sultan:

Thou, Sultan, art the devil's son,
The grandson of Haspid himself,
And thou, a horned chort!

Thou art but a wretched innkeeper
In Constantinople;
A Macedonian brewer,
Greek and Moldavian swine,
And Babylonian blacksmith;

Thou oppressor of Serbia and Podolia,
Crimean parrot, Egyptian swine-herd;
Owl of Jerusalem!
No help of Christians art thou, but a fool;
No protector of our God.
Thou art not worthy to kiss us anywhere—
Nor worthy to hold our Zaporozje.

We shall fight thee
By land and sea!
We do not fear thee,
Thou son of a dog!
Such is our answer!

We know not what year this may be,
Because we have no calendars in our Seech—
Our Meassiatz* is now in the heaven;
This day is the same day as with you.
Then, Turks, after these words
Try to take us!"

They raised their voices to a crescendo and spat on the ground. The officer of the guard who knew this old traditional song, guessed the purpose of the Cossacks' singing. "So that's the answer you give to Denikin! Very good, you dogs. We'll fill your bellies with lead. Line them up!"

"Hey," some of the men protested, "I thought you said you were going to shoot us at dawn. We haven't had time to wash ourselves and clean our nails. We want to turn out looking our best for your General Denikin."

The guards sent bayonets through the scoffers. Kovalenko sprang forward to defend the men. But he was too late. The guards beat him off with their butts. "You can come in front," said the officer. "We'll give you a lesson in grave digging. Take him," he ordered. The guards surrounded Kovalenko.

Spades were thrust into the hands of a number of the prisoners and they were ordered to dig a number of narrow pits. "We'll take you in tens. Drop him in!" the officer commanded. Kovalenko was thrust into the pit and buried up to his neck.

A drove of horsemen appeared. The officer mounted on to his steed and galloped a couple of hundred yards away. Then he gave the order to charge. Maruska covered her face with her hands. The Cossacks charged over the buried men. They returned with their horses' hooves stained in blood.

Suddenly a yell was heard and an astonishing sight filled the

* Moon

onlookers' eyes. A whole drove of horses neighing like wild brass trumpets tore down upon them. Their tails were flaming with fire. As they rushed through the camp the hay-carts caught fire. Men began screaming and shouting at the animals. But the demented creatures ran hither and thither, setting fire to the wooden houses so that very soon the whole place was a raging inferno.

Maruska and the whole company fell flat on the ground. She could discern through the smoke the shape of men on foot and horse-men advancing behind the wall of flame which was created by the flock of burning tails.

Fierce bayonet fighting took place. By dawn the din was over. The Red Forces had broken through. They had driven the remaining fifteen thousand Don Cossacks over the Donetz and had taken Lugansk.

In the front rode Grishka. By his side trotted the little pony with Kovalenko's son on it. The first thing that Grishka did was to disinter the ten men who had been buried. They were nearly all killed. Their brains had been dashed to pieces. But Kovalenko was still alive, although he suffered from the most terrible gashes across the forehead.

THIRTEEN

ALTHOUGH the Don Cossack Armies were driven helter-skelter over the River Donetz and the Don and many of them subsequently joined the various partisan armies operating either with the Red Army or behind the White lines, the main strategy of General Denikin was not defeated by this successful push to Lugansk. The Whites retreated into strong positions forming a semi-circle around Rostov. The men on both sides were nearly equal. The aid given by French and British Military Missions to Denikin enabled him to hold out. His guns and planes were a constant menace which only the individual bravery of the partisans of the Red Army was able to counteract.

Admiral Kolchak, after a *coup d'état* in Siberia, appointed himself Supreme Ruler of Russia and Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Denikin hastened to send his congratulations despite the pangs of jealousy which he endured. Every White Commander considered his front the most vital in the final subjugation of the October Revolution. Wrangel in the Caucasus imagined that he held the 'key plan'. The attack on Tsaritsyn. Denikin was more concerned about keeping the Donetz out of Bolshevik hands. Kolchak threatened to march down the Urals to the Volga, and up to Moscow.

It was only an extraordinary piece of good luck which enabled the Red Command to discover the exact plan of campaign which Kolchak and Denikin agreed to undertake. Communication between the two supreme rulers was very hazardous, and for some reason Denikin felt in an imperial mood and decided to write a letter to Kolchak himself. He wrote it in large handwriting. His phrasing had all the

tinges of megalomania. But the two sentences which he underlined were all the Red High Command needed to know. 'Please God,' Denikin wrote piously, 'we shall meet in Saratov and decide that question for the good of the motherland.'

The dispatch was further illuminated with this sentence: 'At present we are receiving ample assistance with supplies from the British. . . .' The letter was entrusted to General Grishin-Almazov. Generals are not usually couriers, but Almazov was anxious to contact Kolchak personally. Besides Denikin's letter, he carried a great deal of other important correspondence.

The only way that he could pass through the Red lines was through the Caspian Sea. He embarked on a dark night at the small port of Petrovsk.

FOURTEEN

WHEN Kovalenko was dug out of his living grave, nobody thought that he would live. But for Grishka's and his wife's gentle care he could not have survived. There was also his indomitable will to live.

His smooth raven-black hair was completely white by the end of his two months' confinement in bed. He had grown quieter and more subdued, more thoughtful, so that Maruska was a little afraid of him. "You are reading too much," she would say. And he would insist on her bringing him every paper she could lay hands on.

He was taken far behind the Red lines to Astrakhan by the shores of the Caspian. Kovalenko's fame had spread far. There was talk of giving him a command in the new cavalry corps being formed by Budenny. But as yet he could hardly stand without Maruska's heavy support.

"I need air," he complained. "Astrakhan smells of fish. I eat fish; I dream fish. I am sick of lying in clean sheets. The disinfectant smell makes my head swim. Why don't you make the doctors release me, Maruska?" he asked his wife. "At least they could let me have my sabre so that I can practise. A man loses his skill."

In the afternoons when the Cossack was officially allowed visitors, Mishka, his son, used to come, bringing enormous green melons which gave his father a severe stomach-ache, but without which he mutinied. Before the boy had left, a whole mountain of seeds like a small barricade would grow around the bed.

The father and son found much to talk about. "You know, a Bolshevik Communist must learn to read and write. That is the first thing, Mishka. When you can do that, you can understand what Lenin says."

"Who is Lenin?" the son would ask him.

"Oh, he is an old friend," Kovalenko would assure him. "A Cossack that lived not far from our village. Now he is in Moscow, planning to give the peasants back their land. Planning to make little boys like you go to school."

"Is he the Czar, Papa?"

"Good heavens, no. He is one of us. Sometimes, they say, he even goes about without a collar."

This impressed the child immensely. He gazed up at his father with big wondering eyes and thought him the cleverest man on earth.

"Listen, Mishka," Kovalenko caressed the child's soft curls. "Tell me, what does the sea look like here?"

"It's very blue and very salty. I have made friends with some sailors. They have a motor-boat and they take me out with them sometimes. It's a wonderful feeling. It's like riding a horse in water. The wind goes past your ears, the salty water stings your eyes. It's lovely."

"Maruska," Kovalenko yelled, "that's what I shall do. I shall go on this sea-horse. Say, it goes by itself, without oars or sails? Wonderful. I wonder who invented it."

"Lenin, I expect," the child said innocently.

"They say that Lenin wants electricity to come to Russia."

"Will it taste nice, Father?"

"I don't know. I don't think it is anything to eat. It moves things. Ah, you are a lucky boy, Mishka. What wonders you are going to see in your life!"

When the child left, Kovalenko's thoughts turned to the sea. "The sea is like the steppes," he said to himself. "Broad and free. That's where I'll get well. Not cooped up in a stuffy hospital. Pah!" He felt his muscles and swung his arm to and fro over his head.

"Maruska," he said to his wife, "now that I am getting better, don't you think I could go for a walk? I'd love to see the sea, to touch it."

"That's a matter for the doctor," his wife answered.

But Kovalenko took matters into his own hands. That night when Maruska had gone, he took the clothes from his bedside cupboard and dressed himself surreptitiously. The night nurse had already paid her visit. He felt safe to pursue his adventure.

He opened the door noiselessly and held his breath. The hospital corridor was clear. But to negotiate the doorman—that was a different proposition. He closed the door again and looked at the window. A small room was on the second floor. Too high to jump, thought Kovalenko. And the drain-pipe looks as if it couldn't hold a louse.

He pulled the window open and began feeling for the drain-pipe! Giving it one or two tugs, he decided that perhaps, after all, it could support his weight. Stealthily he crawled through the window and began sliding down the pipe. Once on the ground, he lost his bearings completely. It was a moonless night. The only thing that he could see properly was his own white hands. He guided himself against the bushes with arms outstretched like a blind man.

His walk to the waterfront seemed endless. Armed men patrolled the streets, but he used all his native cunning to pass them, guiding himself by the noise of the sea.

Quite abruptly, at the end of a steep street, he heard the water gently rushing. He inflated his lungs to their fullest extent and sighed. "I wonder why they keep me in the hospital all this time!"

A naval patrol approached on his left side. With the agility of a cat, Kovalenko sprang behind a sea-breaker. He strained his ears. One sailor was saying to the other: "Well, I suppose it's time for our patrol. Dawn in another hour or so."

"Yes," he heard another man reply. Kovalenko could not see the men, but heard them ground their rifles. "I hope we don't have trouble with the engine. You know we pulled it out of a staff-car the Whites abandoned on the Don. It's about 1903 and takes more than half an hour to crank up."

The men walked on. Kovalenko crept out of his hiding-place and followed them, walking as only an expert stalker knows how—his feet firm on the ground. But this was sand. It gritted under his soles and once or twice the patrol stopped and whispered. They walked on.

In the distance, tied to a small quay, Kovalenko could perceive a small craft. One machine-gun on the prow was limned against the sky, and a morning star seemed poised at the barrel's tip. Suddenly the patrol turned round and raced in Kovalenko's direction.

"Hey—who's there? Answer quickly, mind!"

Kovalenko decided to hold his ground. Five Red sailors surrounded him with bayonets.

"Password?" the petty-officer demanded.

"Kovalenko."

"Hold him, boys. He's fooling. What you spying round here for?"

"I'm not spying." Kovalenko tugged and twisted to get his arms free. But the three sailors hoisted him up by the elbows. They took him down the narrow embarkation board on to the torpedo boat and thrust him into a cabin.

"Listen, lads," Kovalenko pleaded. "Don't treat me so roughly. No, let go. . . . Stop your games. Don't you know Kovalenko?"

"Of course we know him. He's in hospital. The Astrakhan sailors send him flowers and books every week. He doesn't come snooping round the docks at night though. You'd better explain it to the Commander."

The Commander, hearing the scuffle, entered the room. He was a tall, large-boned man, and wore a thick grey jersey that was covered with grease. But his face was pleasant, thought Kovalenko.

"Listen, Commander, I'm Kovalenko. Tell your men to release me."

The sailors cut across Kovalenko's pleas and gave their version of events. The Commander nodded. "We'll be starting in a few moments and we can throw him out at sea," he remarked coolly, looking very closely at Kovalenko. "You're a Cossack, aren't you? Who you spying for? Denikin?"

"Listen, you idiots. . . ." Kovalenko yelled. "Let go of me. I'll beat the lights out of you if you don't stop twisting my arm. Yes, I'm a Cossack. I'm Kovalenko. You've heard of me, you sea-worms, haven't you?"

"Of course we have," the Commandant agreed. "Who hasn't heard of Kovalenko. But can you prove you're the man? Can you now? Be honest. If you can't, well, be a man. The Caspian Sea isn't very cold even in winter. We'll drop you gently. Like mothers."

The engines began to turn. The frail craft began to shiver.

"All right," said the Commandant. "Let go of him. Put him on deck. He might sing for us or amuse us. Can you sing?"

Kovalenko nodded his head. "The devil," he thought. "Did the Commander really mean what he said about dropping him out at sea. What a fool he had been to take no identification papers with him. And he couldn't swim, otherwise he'd try and dive over the side of the boat as it left the harbour."

He went on deck. The breeze lifted up his springy kiss curl, and the spray left salt on his lips.

"Where are we going?" he asked brusquely.

"What's it matter to you?" asked the Commander. "We'll drop you as soon as we get to the really deep water. Come on, sing. Or tell us a story about Shkuro."

"I don't know any stories. But I promise you you'll be hanged if you throw me overboard. Old man Lenin will kick up an awful fuss."

"So you know Comrade Lenin, eh? That's very funny. Do we look that simple?"

At that moment a great albatross swooped towards them.

"That's good luck for us," said the Commander, steering his boat nearer to the bird. "But not for you. Listen, you'd better tell us who you're spying for. How did you evade the town patrols?"

Kovalenko did not answer. He screwed up his eyes and then put up his hand to shade them.

"Look, Commander," he said. "I see a ship. Two of them. One big and the other very small. Are they ours?"

The Commander looked out in the direction Kovalenko was pointing. "I can't see anything." But Kovalenko insisted. "You're just trying to get me to take my eyes off you. No use. If you jump in the sea here the sharks will eat you," he lied. There were no sharks in the Caspian, but Kovalenko was mortally afraid. They were in the wrong element. If he met a shark on a horse with a sabre, that would be different, but he had heard stories. He pulled himself up, took the expression of wonder from his face and said:

"Go on, look through your glasses and see if I'm not right."

"Are you giving me orders, you landlubber?" But the Commander moved his binoculars up to his nose and peered with one eye, and with the other kept Kovalenko in view.

"So you're right," he whooped. "Hey, lads, our pirate has eyes like a hawk. All right, Cossack. They're your friends. It's a White gunboat and a cutter. They're riding about a mile apart. That's strange. I think I'll send a couple of torpedoes at the big ship. The small one looks too unimportant to me."

"But it's got greater speed," said Kovalenko. Then he paused for a moment and appraised the situation. He was thinking like the

cavalry commander that he was. "Why don't you surround the little ship. Let's run up to her and sabre her first?"

"What, and let the big one go? You're mad. She'll have her guns on us any minute."

"Exactly. And what guns have you to defend yourself with? You're only a patrol raft. If you get within range she'll knock you out of the water. But the little ship, I don't suppose it's even got a machine-gun. That's the way we partisans fight. With our heads. We attack the small, because it leads us to the big. We prefer to bite just as much as we can chew."

"Now, listen, none of your brag. You think a Red sailor is frightened. We'll send a couple of torpedoes into the big one. The little one can go to hell."

As he spoke a shell whined over their heads.

"They are finding range," said Kovalenko, well satisfied with his plan of campaign. "When the enemy sights you, you hide."

"Listen. This isn't a Cossack brigade!" the Commander growled angrily. "Where you think we can hide? Suggest we turn ourselves into a submarine?"

"No. You can outdistance her. That's the same as hiding. Say, Comrade Commander, if I had a rowing-boat I will capture that little skiff. See how it's making for port?"

"Of course. It's trying to get under the protection of the fort at Alexandrovsk."

"Well, then, here's your chance," Kovalenko shouted enthusiastically.

The Commander, irritated by this good sense, steered the boat across the White cutter's tracks. When they were within about a hundred yards, he ordered her to be sprayed with machine-gun fire. The cutter replied and sent all the men flat on the deck.

"Aha, you were wrong, comrade spy," said the Commander. "But I haven't fallen into your trap. No machine-guns, eh? They are hidden in the portholes. But I'll send a nice fat cigar into her and I've a good mind to load you in the other tube and send you head on into the gunboat."

The cutter manoeuvred to escape, but the Commander decided to hold on to her tail. The cutter's machine-guns were not very effective from that angle.

"Board her! Board her!" Kovalenko shouted, prodding the Commander in the back.

"With three men?" he sneered.

"Well, I'll make up the fourth," Kovalenko volunteered.

"Think I'd trust you with a pistol?"

"All right, Commander. Give me a matchet or a sabre. Come, you're not frightened of a man with a sabre. I'll jump on the cutter first and your other men follow."

The Commandant handed him his cutlass suspiciously. "One false move and I'll draw a pattern in your back."

The torpedo-boat ran full tilt into the side of the cutter, but by a

clever manoeuvre the cutter turned swiftly on her side and avoided the collision, although she lost much of her paint.

"Again," Kovalenko ordered.

The Commander turned his ship on her tracks and raced to the cutter. When there was barely a foot to spare between them Kovalenko sprang on the cutter, swung himself over the rail, and rushed at the man standing at the cutter's bridge. The Commander and two sailors followed him. They saw Kovalenko strike down the captain, and as the hatch opened and five other men came out, he fell upon them, forcing them to retreat. He ran down the short stairs after them and throwing his full weight against the door burst it open.

A terrible cry rose from one of the trapped men.

"Kovalenko! My God!"

Kovalenko immediately recognized the officer. It was the one who had condemned him to be trampled under the horses' hooves. Kovalenko took a step forward and swung his cutlass at the man's head. The officer ducked. Kovalenko prepared to take another cut, but the officer avoided him nimbly and, springing to the door, rushed up on deck and threw himself over the rail into the sea.

The other four Whites tore after him and seeing their friend struggling in the water, they followed him. The Red Commander did not bother to shoot after them, he saw they could not swim. He rushed into a cabin at the other end of the ship, and saw Kovalenko standing with his arms folded before a tall, grey-bearded man, who was covering him with a revolver. The man wore a general's uniform.

But the strange thing about the scene was that the White General, despite his superior weapon, hesitated to fire.

As the Red Commander entered the cabin, the General looked anxiously round the room. Kovalenko followed his gaze to a leather case; he leapt on it and pulled out some documents. One of the letters was addressed to Admiral Kolchak.

"So . . ." he whistled.

General Grishin-Almazov, who had been entrusted with the letter by Denikin, slowly drew the revolver up to his head and fired.

"So you *are* Kovalenko!" said the Red Commander triumphantly. "Why, you look just like any other Cossack. . . ."

FIFTEEN

THE struggle with the White Guard officers had sorely tested Kovalenko's strength. The Commander of the boat and the two hefty sailors had to use all their strength to haul him aboard their boat. There was no time to be lost. The enemy destroyer was blazing away at them with all its light armament, but it was still a good six miles away.

The motor was started with a hitch, and Kovalenko lay sprawled on the narrow deck, clutching the leather case which he had snatched from the suicide's hand before fainting.

"Well, you are a lad," the Commander complimented him, as the

motor-boat cut sharply away from the deserted cutter, deserted, that is, but for the officer who had shot himself. There was no trace of the others who had jumped out.

Kovalenko rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Now will you believe who I am?" he asked.

"Well," the Commander replied dubiously. "It's easier to believe it. You say you are from the military hospital in Astrakhan? We'll verify it. We have to be careful you know. If you turn out to be Kovalenko, well, I suppose you'll punch a few of our teeth out and let it go at that, comrade?"

The little craft gathered speed and was soon within the defensive range of the fortress guns at Astrakhan. The enemy destroyer circled for a little while, like a baffled hawk, and then gave up the pursuit. No sooner had the Commander pulled his craft smartly up to the quay than he was met by a group of Red Army men who congratulated him on his splendid fight.

"Don't thank me," he replied. "Thank this man for the victory." He pointed to Kovalenko who was being helped to his feet.

No sooner had the burly figure of the Cossack leader appeared, than the Red Army men began to shout and sing.

"It's Kovalenko! Comrade Kovalenko, have you taken your horse out to sea? He's ill! They said he was in hospital."

The Red Army men rushed on board the small vessel and lifting Kovalenko gently with innumerable hands, carried him on shore.

"All right, lads. All right," Kovalenko protested. "Set me down. I'm not wounded."

But the men refused to listen to him. They carried him through the streets back to the hospital. Apparently a search had been made for the missing Cossack since early morning, and everyone had a different theory to explain Kovalenko's disappearance. Some were quite sure that he had been kidnapped by the Whites. . . .

The pandemonium in the hospital was indescribable. The attendants and doctors were rushing about like madmen, looking into every room and ward, even searching the kitchen cupboards. Maruska, Kovalenko's wife, led the party of searchers.

"He was hungry, poor dear," she wailed. "Look in the oven," or, "You might find him in the children's ward."

In the end the Militia were called in. The Commandant, a man called Favel Lavrentev, rushed to the hospital and began questioning all the doctors and nurses.

"This is a plot," he affirmed. "Who is responsible? Who is the doctor who attended to our hero?"

Dr. Smirkin, the head of the hospital, stepped forward. He swore that he had seen him the previous evening and that Kovalenko was asleep. "You had better ask his wife how he escaped. She sleeps in his room."

Maruska could throw no light on the escape, but she did say something that caused a tremendous stir amongst the doctors and assistants and raised a fiercesome howl from the Red Army men.

"All I remember," she said, "was tucking Vassia in bed last night. Then when he was asleep I went over to kiss him. I noticed a small glass with some medicine in it and thinking that Vassia had forgotten to take it, I was going to wake him up. But he slept so fast, so beautifully, I did not have the heart. I smelt the medicine. It smelt good. There seemed to be some spirits in it. I thought to myself, if the doctor finds that the medicine hasn't been drunk, then he'll be angry with Vassia. Vassia often didn't drink his medicine but threw it into his chamber. So what did I do? I drank it myself."

"And then?" asked Lavrentev, the Commander of the militia, who was getting a little exasperated by Maruska's tale.

"Well, Comrade Commander, I can't remember. I went off to sleep like a dead person."

"It must have been a sleeping draught," said the Commander. He waited for the doctor to corroborate this statement.

Dr. Smirkin nodded. "The fact is, I have been worrying about Comrade Kovalenko. He has been so impatient of late to get up and rejoin his command. I thought it wiser to give him a little longer to recuperate his full strength. The dose of sleeping draught which his wife drank was meant to tax the strength of a big man. The woman may have done herself considerable harm."

The doctor had barely stopped speaking when another man stepped forward. He was one of the student doctors. He had seen some considerable fighting with the Red Army. But as there was a shortage of trained medical men he was ordered to work in the hospital at Astrakhan. "Comrade doctor, on my round of inspection . . ."

It was this student, Mavrik Tulov, who had given the alarm about Kovalenko's escape. He continued: "I found Comrade Kovalenko's wife stretched out on the floor like one dead. In her hand was a glass. The floor round her was stained. Apparently she had not taken the full draught."

Smirkin began to fidget. He looked one way and then the other.

"Yes, yes," he said. "We know that. But what has that got to do with Kovalenko?"

"Just this," said the student. "I smelt the glass and instantly recognized . . ."

"A sleeping draught. What is remarkable about that?"

"Yes," said the student. "A sleeping draught. But with this difference: it contained a heavy proportion of arsenic."

The consternation in the room reached such a pitch that the Commander had to shout for silence. "Do you testify as to the arsenic, Comrade Tulov?" he asked sternly.

"Most certainly," the student replied. "I took the trouble of having the sediment at the bottom of the glass analysed this morning. The analysis is signed by the two hospital laboratory assistants. Here it is!" He handed over a small sheet of paper to the Commander.

Smirkin laughed uncomfortably. "Really, what is all this bother about? A revolution must trust its doctors. How is this student to

know but that my special prescription for Kovalenko contains arsenic in order to rebuild his strength? I can prove it. Any doctor worth his salt knows that arsenic has great beneficial qualities."

"Quite," the student doctor snapped back. "But not when you administer ten grains of it at a time."

"The fact is——" Smirkin began protesting.

"The fact is," the Red Army man roared back, "that if Kovalenko doesn't appear, we'll cook you on our bayonets."

And just at that moment Kovalenko himself was brought in, sitting cheerfully on top of the shoulders of a giant soldier. He waved his hand to the company that retreated before him as before a ghost. Maruska flung herself on his legs and began kissing him. "My pigeon, my pet. What did they do to you? There has been a murder here. Arsenic."

"What murder?" Kovalenko roared. "Who has been murdering who?"

Smirkin was led away by an escort. The student doctor came up to Kovalenko with a reproachful look. "You know, Comrade," he said, "Fate will not be so kind to you another time. But we cannot be angry with you. You must thank your wife. She nearly drank a whole tumbler full of poison for you."

"Is that what's been happening here whilst I have been fighting the White Guards?" Kovalenko roared. He leapt down to the ground with a thud. "Commander Lavrentev, take this package. We found it aboard a White cutter. I suspect there is something useful in it."

The Red Commander ripped off the leather covering and pulled out the documents. "Comrade Kovalenko," he said, "whether ill or well, you always do a timely thing. These papers contain the plan of operation of General Denikin and Admiral Kolchak. I shall have them taken to headquarters immediately."

Kovalenko beamed with the soft pleasure of a child. "There," he turned round to the commander of the torpedo-boat, "now do you believe me? I am Kovalenko." He hit himself a resounding smack on the chest. They led him away and put him into a white nightshirt and tucked him comfortably in bed whilst Maruska was ordered an immediate stomach-pump.

SIXTEEN

KOVALENKO slept, flapping his enormous moustache into the air with every heave of his breath. Maruska, after her stomach-pump, sucked a lump of sugar and gazed with affection at the sleeping man. As he tossed and turned she hurried to smooth his pillow and to kiss him back into his dreams.

And what did Kovalenko dream? He dreamt of peace like all the other millions of Russians at the time. He dreamt of a village built up from the ashes, a new *isba*, a fine drove of horses and land that was his own. He liked the new régime which called everybody

comrade. Life was going to be more friendly, he thought to himself. "I don't want to be Napoleon all my life." He spoke out loud in his dreams.

Unnoticed by Maruska, a man entered, followed by the doctor. He was a thick-set fellow, dressed in cavalry uniform. His dusty boots and enormous spurs tore Maruska from her meditation. "Sh . . . sh . . ." Maruska hissed as the man approached, "don't jingle so."

The stranger immediately stopped. Turning to a number of people who had crowded into the room with him, he said: "Let me be alone."

Just at that moment, Kovalenko pronounced that he did not want to be Napoleon all his life.

The cavalryman tiptoed to the bed and whispered to Maruska: "What did he say?"

"He said something about not wanting to be Napoleon. What has it got to do with you? Who are you?" She looked up at the man's weather-beaten face. She was a little angry that he, too, possessed a fine moustache. It was, as a matter of fact, a little larger than her husband's and very black. "Why do you have such a big moustache?" Maruska whispered.

"Why," he said, stroking one of them, "this one is aimed against the enemies of my country. And this one," he stroked the other and winked, "this one is for the ladies."

"Don't you take advantage of me," Maruska said harshly, "if my husband should hear you, he would be very angry. Who are you?"

"Budenny. Commander of the First Red Cavalry Army, formerly a sergeant."

"Budenny," Maruska screamed. "Budenny. Are you the famous commander himself?"

Budenny nodded his head modestly and twirled the moustache which he said was for the ladies.

Maruska beat her fist on Kovalenko's chest. "Wake up!" she shouted. "Wake up! Budenny is here."

Kovalenko, hearing the roar of the magic name in his sleep, leapt out of the bed, standing in his ridiculously short night-gown which barely reached his hips, and saluted.

"Now, now," said Budenny. "There is no need for all this show."

Kovalenko opened his eyes. "Budenny," he said, "Comrade Budenny, is it really you?"

"I believe so," the Red Army Commander laughed aloud. "Come, get back into bed. I have come to interview you. It is I who should salute you. The papers you brought back with you this morning have proved invaluable."

"Do you really think so, comrade?" Kovalenko asked. "I smelt those papers right out at sea. It was quite a simple job. If the boat hadn't been there I would have found a horse and swam out to them. That destroyer . . . I am sorry I wasn't able to bring that back to you. If there was long enough rope, I would have tied it round its

neck and brought it to shore tame as a sheep. I promise you," he boasted.

"Kovalenko," said Budenny, "you are a boaster, and like all boasters, you are probably a good liar. But you have steel in your sinews and a good heart. You care for the workers and the peasants. You fought for them for two years. We have not been unmindful of your good work."

"So you have noticed me," said Kovalenko.

"Yes, we have noticed you. We have an offer to make to you. You have probably not heard that the campaign against the Whites is nearly finished. The papers you found enable us to bottle them up here in the south whilst we turn our attention to the Poles."

"What, have the Poles joined the Whites?" Kovalenko gasped.

"No," said Budenny. "The Poles have remained the Poles. Only they think we are weak. They have begun to march on Kiev. The doctor tells me you will be well in a week or so. I offer you a divisional commander's position in the 'Red Cavalry'. Will you accept and help me to drive them out?"

"Commander Budenny," Kovalenko shouted with joy, "I have always wanted to be a brigadier." Then he paused. "But you know, I have never fought in an army, that is, not since I became a commander. I am a free sort of a man, I like to give my own orders. Don't you think I'd be better behind their lines, enlisting the population for old man Lenin's cause?"

"What do you know about the cause?" asked Budenny.

Kovalenko scratched his head. "What do you know?" he said.

"I know that our country has now a government of its own. The workers and peasants are creating Soviets even in the rear of the Poles. That's why you must accept my offer, Kovalenko. You will be a brigadier because you will serve the Revolution."

"Can I take my men with me?" Kovalenko asked anxiously.

"Yes, all of them, if you so desire. Ah, then there is another thing: we have decided to appoint a Commissar to your forces."

"What for?" Kovalenko flashed back. "Don't you trust me?"

"Yes," said Budenny, "we trust you with military details; but your politics are a little weak."

"You don't win a war with politics," Kovalenko fired back. "It's with the sword"—he swished his hand in the air backwards and forwards.

"No," said Budenny, "no longer. You fight with politics as well. And that's why you are going to have a Commissar!"

"All right, I'll take him," Kovalenko grumbled. "But I warn you if he is chicken-livered and cannot fight, I'll truss him up on a horse and send him back to you like that."

Budenny's eyes twinkled mischievously. "The Commissar," he said, "is waiting outside to make your acquaintance. May I show him in?"

"No," said Kovalenko, "I'll have no Commissar seeing me in bed with a nightshirt on."

"Now, now," Maruska soothed him, "even Lenin goes to bed sometimes. Here, I'll bring you a sword. Will you see him then?" She brought Kovalenko his heavy cavalry sabre and laid it across his knees.

Kovalenko took up a heroic posture, his right fist gripping the sword firmly. "Let him come in!" he said.

Maruska went to the door and opened it shyly. A tall spruce young man walked hurriedly into the room and stood to attention. "Father," he said in a low voice.

"Petka," Kovalenko shouted, "Petka, it's you, you puppy. You my Commissar! Oh, Lenin, Lenin! Does he know about politics?" he asked Budenny.

Father and son embraced each other and Maruska, refusing to be left out, joined them on the bed, so that the bed swayed under their collective weight and gave way amidst Budenny's uproarious laughter.

SEVENTEEN

THE rapid retreat of the Poles did not permit Kovalenko and his new commissar to get behind their rear. Immediately they got to the rear of the Polish forces they found they were engaging their front. Kovalenko swore loudly. "Where the devil do these Polacks get their strength to run away so fast? Why don't they stop and fight? They came to Kiev, why can't they take a hiding like men? Bah, it's so silly. Now you explain to me, my Commissar, what it's all about."

A certain amount of tension had existed for a number of weeks between father and son. Tension is perhaps too obvious a description. It was more like an itch, like a slight irritation which Kovalenko tried hard to sneeze out of his soul but could not. He would reason to himself. "The boy knows politics. That's why he is a Commissar. But that doesn't mean that he knows how to fight. We shall see. I shall take his trousers off him and give him a good hiding if he runs away."

The Red Armies pushed on to the gates of Warsaw. Terrified by the prospects of a Soviet Poland and a Germany already contaminated by Communist ideas, the Allies sent hurried reinforcements to bolster up the Polish defence. The Red Army strength was not limitless. It had thrown off the Polish attack and driven them back, largely with cavalry forces. There was still another campaign going on against the Whites. The fresh Allied reinforcements finally snatched the ultimate prize of victory from their hands. On the night of the last attack, Kovalenko addressed his son. "Listen, Commissar," he said, "I don't know whether you have seen a real battle. But it's very bloody."

Pyotr had stood his father's mockeries in good spirit for a long time. He had done his best to prevent lack of discipline which prevailed amongst the men who had little political knowledge, who had often fought simply for the joy of battle, and who at times had robbed,

grew drunk, sworn, and behaved in an undisciplined fashion from sheer ennui.

Kovalenko shielded his boys behind his authority. But Pyotr wrote many uncomplimentary dispatches about his father's ignorance of the real issues at stake. Slowly he had tried, by example, to show the men that being a good Communist was not inconsistent with bravery, nor did it mean having to be a bookworm or a 'student'. The rough fighting men had taken a liking to the Commander's son and no doubt there were some traces of jealousy in Kovalenko's attitude towards Peter because of this. He felt, perhaps, that Peter was alienating the affection of his men.

"Of course," said Pyotr, "this is my first real battle. But I fought in the streets of Kiev."

"Ah that's nothing," said Kovalenko. "That's puppy fighting. Any fool can fight from a house. Why, old women can pour hot water out of a top storey window. But this, my lad, is a battle of wits." He tapped his head. "You need brains."

He stopped himself short. This was one of Peter's favourite phrases when explaining to the men that it was not sufficient to have just brute courage. "Well," said Kovalenko, "I have always told the men you had to have brains for fighting. And another thing. I suppose you used a pistol and rifle all the time. But here you must learn to swing a sabre. Now, just swing it once or twice round your head, and let's see how good you are."

Peter, who was of frailer build than his father, lifted up the heavy sword out of the scabbard and swung it like a gymnast round his head. Kovalenko did not know that his wide-awake Commissar son had practised this feat many nights because he knew that no Cossack would take orders from him if he couldn't make the sabre whistle round his head.

Kovalenko grunted. "Yes," he said, "that's very nice. But it's one thing throwing it about your head and cutting an enemy in two. That's when it becomes tricky." Then he softened. "Listen, Peter," he said, "you are a boy still. The Revolution needs people like you. That's what I always say to the boys. You can stay behind whilst we make the attack. Let the old men like me go forward. We are an ignorant bunch of fools. The Revolution won't miss us."

Peter knew what was gnawing at his father's heart. "You cannot become a Bolshevik in a few months, Father. There is a lot to learn. I was lucky. I was caught up right in the middle of the city proletariat. As a factory worker, the learning came easier to me. I could read and write."

"I can read and write," his father snapped back. "The Austrians taught me."

"Ah, the Austrians. But they didn't teach you what to read and write. You peasants are going to be a problem."

"You peasants," his father sneered. "Fine Bolshevik you are, speaking to me as you peasants. Don't they teach you to respect your father?"

Peter changed his tactics immediately. "I was only going to say that the peasants will find the Revolution difficult to understand at first."

"What's difficult in understanding a piece of land? That's what the Revolution has promised us. Isn't it?"

"Yes," said Peter, "that's what it has promised you. But there is more to it than that. You must know how to use the land."

"I suppose you will start teaching us. Have you been able to grow corn out of your machines? Or make artificial cows in your factory? Why does everyone always want to teach the peasants? We know how to grow corn and how to look after cows. What more do you want from us?"

At that moment a dispatch rider came galloping past them. He reined his horse and brought her trotting up to the Commander. "The move begins at twelve midnight. Comrade Budenny's orders. I am appointed as a liaison."

"What's your name?" asked Kovalenko.

"Boris Mishkin."

"What are you by profession?"

"An art student."

"How long have you served?"

"Two years in the Revolutionary armies. I deserted the second day from the Tzar's army in the beginning of 1917."

"So," Kovalenko whispered in his beard, "are you a Communist?"

"Yes, Comrade Commander."

"Oh, that's fine. You are all Communists except me."

Mishka saluted Peter. "I have heard a lot about you, Commissar. You led the Kiev workers against the Petlyurians. They spoke about you in Moscow at the Party Congress."

"Heigh," said Kovalenko, "I suppose they didn't mention me."

Mishkin looked quizzically at the disgruntled old man. But Peter gave him a gentle tap with his foot. "You are famous enough," laughed Mishkin, with a high feminine laugh.

The night was cloudy, but occasionally the moon sailed out and shone for a moment on the terrain. Kovalenko's position was on the right flank. His attack was to synchronize with an attack from the left. The centre would move in to support the two flanking movements.

"A night for poetry," said Mishkin languidly.

Peter looked at him and smiled to himself. The cultured voice and polished manner of the liaison officer were not displeasing to him. There was a slight air of bravado about the way he wore his Cossack hat, somewhat too far down on his right ear. When he looked closer, he noticed the young man carried books in his ammunition holsters. Peter tapped them with his whip. "What are these?" he said, "armour plating?"

"Armour if you like, but for the mind. One is a book by Lenin; and the other is a selection of Pushkin. I tried to read them both at the same time. It's a wonderful *mélange*."

Kovalenko moved restlessly in his saddle. He rode off, leaving

the two young men talking animatedly to each other. He passed down the long lines of mounted men. "Lads," he said, "this is a decisive moment. Behave like Communists. They have sent us a Commissar, my son, phew!" He spat as if the taste wasn't pleasant in his mouth. "Well, you won't disgrace me, will you, comrades?"

"Don't worry, old man," shouted some young Cossacks who had pulled out their swords and were waving them in the moonlight. "We won't disgrace you."

A few of the older horsemen crowded round Kovalenko. "Any special tactics to-day, Batko?" they asked him.

They always used this affectionate form of Ukrainian address when speaking to Kovalenko.

"The youngsters can ride under their horses' bellies. But you old fellows stay close with me."

"What, are you going to lead the charge?"

"Certainly," said Kovalenko. "I and my son, the Commissar."

An owl hooted in a close-by thicket. Kovalenko strained his ears. "That's the scouts!" he said. "We have about two miles to go before we fall upon the Poles. Muffle your horses' hooves with rags. We will be starting in a moment."

EIGHTEEN

THE attack was swiftly carried out. Kovalenko's men moved in the semi-darkness with astonishing silence. They held their horses' soft nostrils to prevent them from neighing, and fell upon the Poles with a blood-curdling shout.

Peter, Mishkin, and Kovalenko rose up in their stirrups and led the charge. They swept upon the Polish cavalry and before half an hour was over had routed it. The infantry turned to fight with their bayonets, but Kovalenko's force surrounded them. The Cossacks dismounted and began to use their Mausers.

But the Polish infantry held fast. Suddenly a tremendous artillery barrage began firing over their heads. They knew what that meant. Retreat was cut off.

"Well, there is nothing for it," said Kovalenko. "Get the men to mount, Peter. We must cut through the enemy and join up with our other forces."

The enemy artillery men corrected their range and very soon shells began falling amongst the frightened horses. The men held their ground and beat off Polish counter-attacks. Mishkin was sent off to report on the state of the battle to the Central forces. Peter counselled a withdrawal. "We are losing too many men," he said. "Let's wait until morning."

But Kovalenko refused to listen to him. "I have had orders from Budenny to split up the Poles—and split them I shall. Who is coming with me?"

The cavalymen rose in their stirrups and met the hail of fire with

a defiant gesture. "Forward!" Kovalenko's Cossacks swept across the field and fell on the heavy guns, cutting the gunners to pieces.

But the enemy had been reinforced with French and British tanks. The Cossacks hurled themselves on the iron monsters, but were impotent. Kovalenko saw one of his friends, Dimitri Mudry, leaping out of his saddle and seizing one of the tank's machine-guns. He tried to break it off with his hands. Then he tried to bite it. But the weapon was too hard to break.

The machine-gun was creating terrible havoc amongst the Cossacks. Then Dimitri seized the barrel and thrust it against his chest. An angry rattle filled his body with metal. But Kovalenko and his troops were saved by the sacrifice of the Caucasian. There was nothing to do but retreat.

NINETEEN

KOVALENKO was furious with man, God, and devil. But he was secretly proud of the part that Pyotr had played in the battle. The tireless young Commissar had ridden up and down the lines rallying the men. His attack was particularly inspiring against the guns. Much blood spurted out of superficial wounds on his face and arms. But he ignored it. "He is a real Cossack," his father said to himself.

When speaking to him, he adopted a more brusque air. "Well, youngster, how do you like the taste of sulphur? Now you are a political, tell me, why was the order given to us to retreat?"

"Because," said Pyotr, "we were beaten!"

"What do you mean, beaten?" the old man growled. "I, Kovalenko and my Cossacks have never been beaten. Who gave the order?"

"Budenny, of course."

"And who else? Who made Budenny give the order?"

"The Party."

"Oh, I thought so. Always the damned Party. Why don't you amateur soldiers mind your own business?"

"You wouldn't call Comrade Stalin an amateur soldier if you knew him!" said Peter quietly. "We are beaten because we have no arms, no heavy artillery, no tanks and planes. But that doesn't matter. We have our own great land. We have the future. They can't take that away from us. We did not come to Poland for conquest. We came to answer an attack, to beat off the invader. And this we have done."

"True," said Kovalenko, "there is something in what you say."

The retreat of the Red Army was carried out in a most orderly fashion, despite the tanks and the aeroplanes which were aiding the Poles. Kovalenko and his forces were given a difficult task in fighting a rearguard action. There was little hope that any of them would survive. "But someone had to do it," said Kovalenko, when the order came through, brought by the young liaison officer Mishkin. "It's an honour, isn't it?" Kovalenko asked his son.

"Yes," said Peter, "you are defending the Revolution. Your fight for its early existence will not be forgotten, Comrade Commander. The Party will know how to reward you and your men."

"Bah!" Kovalenko spat in his hands and cracked his whip. "Reward us. Who will there be to reward but our ghosts? You, Peter, and Mishkin, you are getting in my way. What would you say if I ordered you to leave the front?"

"We would refuse," the two young men chorused.

"Even if I gave the order?" Kovalenko asked sternly. "I'll send you back trussed up like chickens, I warn you."

"Your orders are confined to the battle-field," Peter answered him; "we'll obey every one of those without flinching. But you can't dismiss your political commissar nor your liaison officer."

"Is that what the Party says?"

"Yes." They rode on gloomily. Their way lay through a dense copse. Scouts had already notified Kovalenko that it was free of enemy forces and he and his brigade rode into it without fear.

But Kovalenko noticed that the horses were treading shyly, over-delicately. Some even began to dance awkwardly on their back legs, whinnying anxiously to each other. "What are you trying to say, Mazurka?" Kovalenko bent down to his horse's mouth. "Come on, what's ailing you? Have you got a stomach-ache? Speak, Mazurka!"

But there was no need for the horse to speak. A tremendous explosion rent the air. Men and horses were shattered by the force of it. Lumps of flesh rose into the trees' branches and stuck there. Peter and Mishkin were knocked off their horses by the blast. The groans of dying men and the terrible screams of the horses filled their ears.

Peter felt himself all over and then, finding all his limbs intact, moved to Mishkin who sat clasping his arms round his knees, looking at the scene of devastation with the air of a philosopher. "One day I shall paint this picture," he said calmly to Peter.

Peter crawled past him to the dying Mazurka. The horse was in spasms, lifting up its four legs in helpless prayer. She was trying frantically to move off from her crushed master who lay still beneath the horse's weight.

Peter took out his revolver and placed it in the centre of Mazurka's white starred forehead. The horse looked at him almost with gratitude. Her belly had been ripped open by the explosion and the entrails were coming out like blue lava. He fired.

"You idiot," roared Kovalenko. "How dare you slay her?" He had not seen the terrible wound that had been inflicted on Mazurka. "I'll hang you for this. How dare you shoot her?"

Peter looked down at his father's crushed leg. He knew that he could not rise and there was no emergency dressing-station for miles. An army in retreat has few forward medical services. "Here, Mishkin," Peter cried, "let's carry him between us!"

"The devils," swore Kovalenko. "They mined the wood. What

did those two bald-headed scouts do? Were they picking hazel nuts? Why didn't they notice it?"

"Have you any orders?" Peter asked. The men that were alive had gathered round in a group clutching their Mausers tightly in their hands.

"Good," said Kovalenko. "See that no man throws away his rifle. We were ordered to cover the retreat and we will cover it to the last man. Here, give me a rifle. I can still fire even though my leg is broken."

Some of the men cut down long elm-poles and made a rough stretcher for their commander. Peter counted the men. There were only two hundred left out of a good three hundred. The mine had worked a terrible devastation. But, fortunately, there were few wounded; the majority had been killed outright.

The men formed themselves into a phalanx, placing Kovalenko and his carriers in the centre. The long trek back to the Ukraine began. Once or twice they were menaced by enemy cavalry, but they beat them off.

For more than six days they marched. On the seventh, Kovalenko was beginning to run a dreadful temperature. The fever was shaking him and Peter could see that his crushed leg had grown gangrenous. It was already beginning to exude a dreadful stench.

"There is only one thing for us to do if we want to save the old man's life," said Mishkin. "We must get hold of a horse. This progress is too slow." He had read Peter's thoughts.

Kovalenko had allowed himself to be carried unprotestingly. He was now in a state of semi-consciousness and his thoughts began to ramble. He spoke most frequently of Maruska, of old man Lenin, and occasionally of the Communist Party of which he always said "phew!"

This old man who had fought so earnestly for the Revolution knew deep down in his heart its implications. But his mind could realize only simple truths like the need for land, the hope of a better life for the peasants from which he sprang.

To obtain a horse required elaborate strategy. "The only people possessing horses," said Peter, outlining his scheme, "are the Poles. To pick off a horseman is no easy job. One might easily kill the beast he is riding. What are we to do?"

"We are to approach the problem psychologically," said Mishkin. "The Poles' horses are no different than the ones we had. Perhaps we could lay a trap; say, tie a bundle of oats round a hook and go horse-fishing."

"You are an idiot," Peter remarked. "But you have given me an idea. You know what we'll do? We'll form a little group of stragglers. The Poles usually use their cavalry on these. Only we pretend we are stragglers."

"Risky," said Mishkin. "We might come across an enormous cavalry detachment."

Peter would not listen to his caution. That evening he selected

six men and together with Mishkin deliberately hung back on the roadway. "Listen, Mishkin," he told him, "I was brought up on a farm. Not amongst chalks and easels. My father taught me how to throw a lasso. So I'll appoint myself the horse-catcher. Your job is to see that I am not killed in the process, or, if I am killed, to get the horse."

Peter's calculations were accurate enough. A troop of Polish cavalry soon came thundering down upon them, swinging their sabres left and right in the pleasant anticipation of slicing their heads off. Mishkin and the six men loaded their rifles and pretended to flee across the field. Only Peter hid in a ditch, his lasso ready to be thrown out.

The platoon of horsemen did not number more than ten men. They were scouts, and the prospect of cutting up a few stragglers appealed to them. Their captain, a big fellow with an enormous red mop of hair under his Uhlan hat, shouted his orders as they swung down the road. They saw Mishkin and his men scampering across the field and began hopping over the hedges in pursuit.

Peter waited for the last man. Then, throwing his lasso, he caught the horse's head and gave it a savage tug. The horseman flew over the saddle and landed on his neck, stunned. Peter immediately flung himself into the saddle and with the rope adorning the horse like a necklace guided it without reins, using his heels instead. Then he shouted at the top of his voice: "Come on, boys. At them!"

The Poles turned round and saw a lone horseman charging at them. Peter waved his arms frantically as if commanding a whole cavalry brigade. He called out names: "Come on, Stepka, cover their retreat. And you, Feodor, get round behind them."

Mishkin and his men stopped aghast at the performance of one man charging down at ten. They had hopes that Peter had come across a Cossack troop and was charging to their rescue. They fell on their knees and began emptying their Mausers at the Poles, shouting hurrahs and cheering each other up, saying: "The Cossacks are coming."

The Poles, bewildered by this unorthodox behaviour on the part of the men and the horseman, spread in all directions and fled.

Peter rode past Mishkin and the men giving them a friendly wave as he went. "Kovalenko's son!" said one of the men admiringly. "That's a Commissar for you!"

TWENTY

THE serious operation which Kovalenko underwent in the military hospital cost him his right leg. When he woke up from the anæsthetic, he glanced down at his feet. The doctors had carefully built up a dummy leg out of bandages and blankets so that Kovalenko was completely deceived.

He sighed with relief and complained that the big toe of his right

foot burned like fire. "And I am in a damn hospital again," he cursed.

Peter came to see him on the next day. He presented a brave front and did not tell his father about the loss of his right leg. "You have been awarded the Order of the Red Star," he told him.

Kovalenko grinned contentedly. His large blue eyes gazed around the room, and finding that few of the wounded men had heard his son's remark, he shouted at the top of his voice: "So, I have been awarded the Order of the Red Star, have I?"

The weak and the dying raised themselves on their elbows and cheered this announcement. Doctors and nurses rushed in to quieten their patients. With feeble voices the men acclaimed Kovalenko. "Oh, if we only had vodka," they said, "how we would drink to you, Vasya Stepanovitch!"

"So I have the Red Star," said Kovalenko, more quietly this time, obeying the beseeching gestures of the doctors and nurses. "That is good news, Pyotr. And what did they give you?"

"They told me that I did my duty."

"Hah, that's not very grateful of them. They ought at least to have given you a little star of some sort. You are not a bad soldier, you know." He paused. "And where did you get that damn horse from?" he asked curiously.

"I pinched it from a Pole."

"That's a good Cossack!" said Kovalenko admiringly.

"I lasso'd it."

"Lasso'd it? So you have not forgotten my lessons with the steers? When I get better I'll show you how one can lasso with the whip. That's a finer art."

That night Kovalenko went to sleep thinking of the Communist Party which had been so quick to recognize his bravery. It was not such a bad institution after all. He waited eagerly for the day of investiture. But that was not to come until he had recovered fully. Every day for a month he begged the doctors to take off the bandages from his two legs. Every day they put him off, warning him: "You must not try to move them."

But Kovalenko would wriggle the toes of his left foot when they had gone. 'Funny,' he used to think, 'what's happened to my right toes?'

Still, he had been badly wounded and he could not expect to do that just yet.

During the three months that Kovalenko was in hospital he learned that the Whites and the Interventionists had been finally driven out and the Soviet Government established from Kamchatka to White Russia.

Maruska was unable to regain the same placid attitude and easy-going way of hers as before. The peasants were returning to their burnt-out villages and their land and were beginning to sow grain again. She visited her husband with little Mishka who, in the whole two years had seen his father but a few times and had passed out of

babyhood into boyhood. He was in his eleventh year, a sturdy little chap with a cheerful, grinning face. "He is everlastingly hungry," said his mother. "And you know there is not much food in the country these days. The peasants are only beginning to sow now. I dread to think what will happen to us in winter."

"That's the Government's business," said Kovalenko. "I trust them. Why shouldn't you? They have given me the Order of the Red Star."

"What's that?"

"Oh, that's a sort of Communist St. George's Cross. Only it's higher. They don't give many of them away, you know, except for special bravery and initiative."

Maruska covered her husband with enormous fat kisses. Mishka clapped his hands many times and, diving into a hamper which his mother had brought, produced a large green melon. "I want to celebrate," he cried.

"You mean you want to taste the melon," said his mother. "This boy . . ."

"Hah," said Kovalenko, throwing up the melon as if it was a skull, "nice juicy one." He looked round for a knife. But there wasn't one handy. "Give me my sword!" he said.

Mishka ran and pulled the heavy sabre out of the scabbard. Suddenly he thrust it back. "Ooh," he said, "there is blood on it. I won't eat my melon with blood."

"You are a Cossack's son," said Kovalenko. "You will have to eat more than blood before your young life is over. Give me the sword!"

Mishka handed it over to him dutifully. Kovalenko spat on the corner of his sheet and carelessly wiped the sword. Then he began hacking the melon with it into three enormous pieces.

Mishka buried his face in the centre of his piece and began gnawing on it like a mouse, absorbing it with enormous speed, moving his head (or rather the melon), to save time, from left to right.

The three of them carefully spat out the black seeds and made a pile of them on the foot of the bed. "They will do for drying," said Maruska. "I will take them home and dry them and you can have them when you come back."

The doctors thought that the presence of his wife and child would make it easier for Kovalenko to hear the news of the loss of his right leg. They entered in a body and saluted him. Kovalenko always insisted on this form of greeting. He refused to let one of them approach without a salute. And they always had to address him as a comrade brigade commander, a very unorthodox form of greeting to say the least.

"Comrade Brigade Commander," the director of the military hospital said, coughing into the palm of his hand. "The day has come . . ."

"What, has Budenny come to give me my Red Star?" asked Kovalenko joyfully.

"No," said the doctor; "we have come to take off your bandages."

"Oh, I see," said Kovalenko. "Well, it's quite a ceremony we have been having. Have a little melon before you get down to the work!"

The doctors gravely but politely refused the proffered chips of melon which Kovalenko cut off with his sabre from the main piece he was chewing. Little Mishka did not raise his face but continued squelching and gobbling his piece.

Confidently, Kovalenko threw aside his blankets. "Hey," he said, "you have certainly bandaged me well, Comrade doctors. The best I could do was to wriggle my toes. Look," and then with an innocent look in his face, happy as a child, he moved the toes of his left foot.

"Good, good," said one of the doctors. "You see," and he turned to the other doctors, "there is no paralysis. A fine sign!"

Then the doctor bent down and began unwrapping the left leg. "Scars are in a beautiful condition," he said, "perfectly healed. You have no idea what a mess this leg was in!" he said to Kovalenko.

"Well, well, hurry, hurry!" said Kovalenko. "I am dying to do a bit of dancing. Take off the other bandages. My right leg feels a bit stiff!" he complained.

The doctor looked appealingly at Maruska. She had already been warned and knew that her husband had lost his right leg. "Vasya," she said, answering the doctor's glance, "look, you see, you haven't noticed it." And then with trembling hands, she began lifting the dummy leg.

Kovalenko watched with astonishment as the doctors undid the bandage and pulled the dummy leg apart. He gazed at the gap and the sheets for one moment and burst into helpless tears. "I want to dance," he blubbered, "I want to ride my horse. What have you done with my right leg? Give me back my right leg!"

A week later a military mission visited him. It included Budenny. The Red Star was pinned on his breast. "And I have something else for you," said Budenny. "It's a wooden leg. It has been made for you by the army carpenters. It's the next best thing to a real leg. Put it on!"

The first question that Kovalenko asked was: "Can I ride a horse with it?"

"You can ride an aeroplane in it," said Maruska simply.

BOOK TWO

ONE

RUSSIA

By ALEX BLOX

To sin, unashamed, to lose, unthinking,
The count of careless nights and days,
And then, while the head aches with drinking,
Steal to God's house, with eyes that glaze;

Thrice to bow down to earth and seven
Times to cross oneself beside the door,
With the hot brow, in hope of heaven,
Touching the spittle-covered floor;

With a brass farthing's gift dismissing
The offering, the holy Name
To mutter with loose lips, in kissing
The ancient, kiss-worn ikon-frame;

And coming home, then, to be tricking
Some wretch out of the same small coin,
And with an angry hiccup, to be kicking
A lean cur in his trembling groin;

And where the ikon's flame is quaking
Drink tea, and reckon loss and gain,
From the fast chest of drawers taking,
The coupons wet with spittle stain;

And sunk in feather-beds to smother
In slumber, such as bears may know,—
Dearer to me than every other—
Are you, my Russia, even so.

*Translated by Babette Deutsch
and A. Yaromolinsky.*

TWO

Moscow, 1923.

A NEW Russia came into being out of the ashes of the old. But Moscow was no phoenix. Its day of reconstruction had not yet dawned. There was the walled-in Kremlin and, on its eastern flank, the Red Square.

And Kitai Gorod—the Chinese City which contained no Chinese. But with the Kremlin it was part of the real old Moscow. They were the heart of the city, and beyond them concentric rings of boulevards spread out far into the suburbs where the farms and the forests began.

The sky-scrapers had not yet been built. The Metro had not been thought of. Moscow with her cobbled streets, her rambling, unexpected by-ways, squares that seemed to appear from nowhere, monuments, trees, and the moth-eaten palaces of the old nobility where the carpets had been worn thin by the boots of soldiers and officials. And three hundred and eighty-four churches. Holy Moscow had space in her churches when the poor slept without roofs. And the fantastic array of towers, pine-apple-shaped and melon, pointed like minarets, in wonderful shades of gold, brown, red, sea greens, and sapphire blue. And the bells, deep and resonant in the frosty air, and the slight tinkle of little bells that clattered sweet tunes as if they were made of glass.

The inheritors of Peter the Great's legacy brought back the capital to Moscow. Leningrad, a city surrounded by hostile frontiers, cradle of the Revolution though it was, was to be forgotten. It was Moscow again. Moscow of Ivan the Terrible, of the time of troubles; the Third Rome, they called her. First there was Rome, then Constantinople, then Moscow.

Trade was coming back. The lean years, the famine, the terrible disorganization, all these things prevented the immediate application of the Revolution's social programme. The State could not juggle with nothing. Some normality had to appear, some tolerance. Otherwise the peasants would only grow enough bread for themselves. The men in the cities would starve, the markets would be empty. From nothing comes nothing, comes Nep, the New Economic Policy.

The era of rouble millionaires. What a disappointment! What a burlesque on capitalism! That's what the critics and the foreigners said. But Lenin was confident. There was no economic machinery to distribute goods. No good closing down the small enterprises and pooling the artisans. Where would the everyday necessities come from?

The scene is the Tverskaya—the Regent Street of Moscow. In 1923 it was crowded with private restaurants and a Government-operated gambling casino. And why not when the Nepmen were making millions? The merchants who had hidden low during the Revolution came out, brought out their hidden stocks of goods and put them on the shelves again. Men had to eat and wear clothes. The factories had only just begun to work. Most of the clothes that were being sold were second-hand. It was the dance of the hours, the last few hours of Capitalism in Russia. But whilst the dancing was good, it was fierce.

THREE

PETER KOVALENKO, sitting in the corner of his room, was reading a book on aero-dynamics. He was waiting for his friend, Boris Mishkin, and swore gently under his breath as the hours passed and he did not appear.

When the last of the Whites and the Interventionists had been thrown out, Peter was offered a position with the Cheka, the State Police. But he refused. He was anxious to return to his trade as a tool-setter. But the Kiev workshop at which he had been employed had been destroyed. There were few tools in Russia at the time for Peter to set. He had been advised to take up engineering seriously, some modern branch of it, like aeroplane construction, and go to the University.

The Government gave him a small living allowance and, since he had no responsibilities except to look after himself, he gladly took the offer and by 1923 he had already done his first year's course.

He had seen his father only once in the past two years. Occasionally he received letters from him telling him the peasants had slowly begun to rebuild the village and were already tilling the soil. But the conditions were hard for them. A terrible famine swept over the Ukraine so that even the seed had to be eaten for bread. But Kovalenko, his wife, and youngest child survived.

The clatter of boots up the wooden apartment stairs tore Peter from his reverie. He knew by the sound that it was Mishkin. Mishkin in a hurry always made that noise, always forgot that the step before the last on their floor was missing and invariably tripped.

Behind the hurried steps came a heavy creaking noise. A man of weight, perhaps, or a fat old woman, Peter thought.

Mishkin tore the door open and flung it apart with a cheerful hurrah. "Look who I've brought to see you," he yelled. "Pyotr, meet my uncle!"

A very prosperous-looking old gentleman, padded out like a ridiculous wooden doll, came to the apartment. He sniffed delicately, well, perhaps not so delicately and, stretching out a fur-clad hand, gave it to Peter.

"I am very pleased to meet you," said Peter formally. But his friend cut him short.

"I was just admiring some bread and cakes in the Tverskaya," he said, "and who do you think I should recognize behind the counter but my old uncle Timofey."

The man who Mishkin introduced as his uncle shook his head benignly at the news.

"Haven't seen the boy for years," he told Peter. "My sister's boy." He looked round for a chair.

"I'm afraid," said Peter, "we are poor hosts. We have no chair. Will you sit down on the bed."

The man looked round the room and shook his head.

"I suppose you are students," he exclaimed. "Still it's good for young men to go without a few things in their early life. It makes them appreciative."

"That is a way of putting it," Peter agreed.

"Oh, my uncle is a humorist," Mishkin interposed. "But it's a lucky day I met him. He has come to make us a proposition, Peter."

Peter looked uncertainly at the man Mishkin was addressing as his uncle, and waited for him to sit down. The man toddled over to the bed and feeling it as if afraid to trust his weight on it all at once, sat down with a sigh. Then, throwing open his black astrakhan coat, he put the palms of his fat hands on his equally fat thighs.

"Now, Uncle," said Boris coaxingly, sitting down at the foot of the bed and making a face like a pixie, "tell Peter what you told me."

"The idea is simple," the man began. "You know since the Government has permitted private trading, business has improved. Boris tells me that you are a Communist, so I shall speak to you bearing that in mind."

"Yes, you see," Boris interrupted, "Uncle wanted us to go into his business, but I told him you were studying and would probably refuse. But I'm an art student. It doesn't matter to me. I have plenty of time on my hands."

"Go on," said Peter. He was beginning to suspect that the man had come to him with some special request.

"The fact is, my dear Pyotr Vassilievitch, the Government has given us considerable freedom to trade, and we can't complain. Business is excellent. I have quite a number of shops. I am proud to help the Government to distribute goods. But, unfortunately, I am heavily taxed. That is most unreasonable. I have enormous expenses. I have wages to pay, overheads."

"Well, what can I do about it?" asked Peter a little harshly. "I am not the Tax Collector. You better make your complaints to the appropriate authorities. I am sure they'll listen to your grievances and will do the best they can for you."

"Well now, just this. You must understand that my actions are purely patriotic. After all, the country could not do without us. And you remember Moscow a year ago. Look at the difference—we traders all think that the Revolution was necessary."

"Yes," said Peter, "it destroyed many of your powerful competitors."

"Of course, that's true. But then these people held all the business in their hands. We admit that we are selfish. But, after all, isn't an idealist selfish too? Doesn't he also get something out of it? That's human nature, surely. We are all supporters of the Revolution. We sympathize with the poor people. Lenin is a great man. But, after all, it is Lenin who has brought the new economic policy into being."

"It's an emergency measure," Peter assured him.

"Certainly, certainly. Of course, it is. We all understand that. We know that our days are numbered. But when the time comes for

us to go for the public good, be assured, my young friend, I shall relinquish my business without a murmur. I shall go in a factory or some government department. But for the time being one must live." He paused. "As I say, one must live."

"He means," said Boris, playing the part of an interpreter, "that we also must live, Peter. I am getting tired of this rat-hole. Seven-in-a-room existence. My uncle is rich. He has offered us two rooms in his house. Just think of it: two rooms and a real bathroom. After all, we could live there until the Revolution had made real headway and given everybody a separate room and bathrooms . . ." he stuttered.

"Your uncle is very kind," said Peter. "I'd very much like to have a room to myself and a bathroom. But what does your uncle want from me?"

"Just this, just this, my young man," the merchant assured him. "You are a very influential member of the Communist Party. You are on the Committee here in Moscow—the Economic Committee, they call it, I believe. Now, surely you could use your good offices to get a rebate on my taxes. I'll offer you half of everything you get."

Peter looked at Boris and at the merchant and began laughing. "What sort of comedy is this? Are you a couple of *agents provocateurs*? Do you think that I fought for the Revolution to sell it to scum like you? You are paying taxes? Why are you paying taxes? Because the whole of Russia knows that you are making exorbitant profits, that you are swindling the people, that you are trading in scarcity. You are right when you say that your days are numbered. They most certainly are. Go back to your rolls and pastries. Sell them at fancy prices. But one day the people will work for themselves, will sell for themselves, and then, Gospodin Nepman, beware!"

The man was too aghast to answer. After a moment he turned round to Boris and hissed: "I thought you told me he was a friend! What sort of a friend is he? He'll report your poor uncle to the police."

"No, he won't do that," said Boris reassuringly; "but I think you'd better go."

The man shrugged his shoulders and walked heavily out of the room.

"Now, now," said Boris, "let me explain. You see, it's quite simple. I met him casually in the street. He is actually my uncle. And he put the proposition up to me. Well, I thought to myself, since everybody is making a little money for himself these days, why shouldn't I? I am not a member of the Communist Party, I am only a sympathizer. The Nep is bad, but the Government tolerates the Nep. Besides, you look at my shoes. Look at my shirt. Look at the place we are living in. A little comfort wouldn't have done us any harm. Oh, you idealists!"

Peter did not answer him. He pretended to be immersed in his book.

A girl entered the room and smiled wanly at the two men. She was a slight creature with a very pale face, made paler by her raven-

black hair. Her 'room' was the left-hand corner facing the window. She had contrived a cubicle made out of old blankets and the men paid careful attention to her privacy. She had just come back from the factory and wanted to wash. The communal washstand stood near the window. "Come," said Peter, "let's go out."

"Thank you."

Peter nodded brusquely and, seizing Boris by the arm, dragged him out of the room. "Did you see that girl?" he said harshly. "She also needs a room and a bath and a few dainty things to wear. She is beautiful, my friend. But even if she was ugly, she'd still need the comforts of an ordinary human being. Well, the girl's position and mine are the same. Why don't you suggest to her that she should be a prostitute? It's easier. But she chooses to work. To live on half a pound of bread and soup. What's it all for, Boris? Ask the men that died in the Revolution. Ask my father's shattered leg. Ask all the sick and the tormented, the people who died of famine."

"And what answer do you think they'd give you?" Boris shouted back. "They'd say: 'To hell with the Revolution that makes us starve. I thought it would be different.' Hundreds of people like me thought it would be different."

"Oh, you imagined a paradise right away. Did you?"

"We would have been content with living. But what is Moscow to-day? A place of rags, of soup kitchens, of disease, prostitutes, Nepmen like my uncle, fat and fortunate. Vulgar. Without education. Profiteering, crude, noisy."

"It's understandable," Peter explained to him in a quieter voice. "Don't you see these people have no political power, no culture behind them? They don't even respect themselves or stand together as a class. They are pariahs and they know it. They are a thin match-stick bridge which must cover the gap between this day and the morrow of Socialism."

"Yes, yes," said Boris, as they walked down the street, "I understand all this. But it's this waiting that is so terrible. How many years do you think will pass before we can get decent shirts and boots?"

"The answer, I am afraid," continued Peter, "depends on you. What's the use of lying to you? We are only just beginning. In a few years you won't be able to recognize Moscow. You ought to see our plans," he added enthusiastically.

"Oh, I have seen plenty of plans," sighed Boris, "stacks and stacks of them. They look wonderful. But what's the use of showing a menu card to a hungry man when you know there is nothing in the larder? The Communist Party can't always feed us on ghosts. Oh, I suppose I am only a lousy bourgeois. But I am an artist, Pyotr. I am not like you who can live on an idea for a meal. I need a good steak inside of me before I can paint."

"You are a fine artist," Peter laughed. "It's easy enough to do things when you've got the tools, when you've got a steak inside of you. Try to do them without—Russia has to. Why should you be different? We have paid the price for revolution. Millions of lives,

much blood has been sacrificed. Be patient! I promise you that what will happen in this land of ours in a few years will astonish the world. In twenty years' time they won't be able to recognize us. Give us half a century and . . ."

"Oh," said Boris, "for a woman! A woman that doesn't dream. How much money have you got?"

Peter looked into his pocket. "Not much. About eighty roubles. But that's to last me for two weeks."

"Lend me ten."

"Nothing doing."

"Well," said Boris, "then I'll have to sell my old cross. How much do you think I'll get for it?"

"Go to your uncle, the Nepman. He'd probably give you a couple of hundred. Or, better still, take it to the Government department. Russia needs gold to buy machines with."

"What would I want with a machine? If you had said that Russia would buy butter and I'd have a nice big chunk of it, then I'd sell my cross. But machines, phew . . ."

"Well. What are you going to sell your cross for?"

"For a woman. Religion and sex struggle within me," he mimicked. Then he clicked his fingers. "I know," he said, "let's go to the casino. That's what we will do. There is red plush, bright electricity; there are fat Nepman and beautiful women. Perhaps we might even pinch a sandwich or two. Come! Be a sport."

"Well," said Peter, "I'll come if it amuses you. It will do me good to know how the other half lives."

"Oh, don't you be so patronizing. I have heard stories about the casino. They say the Government loads the dice and that it is employing all the croupiers of Monte Carlo that have been thrown out."

The Government-controlled casino was a few hundred yards down the Tverskaya. It was a child of the Nep period, created for the Nepman. A place where they could spend their ill-gotten gains of their swindlings and black market transactions. When they had bought all they wanted to buy, had hidden all they wanted to hide, this was the place to come to, for here the glitter of the electric lights and plush gave them a comfortable feeling of a 'permanent civilization'.

The two young men entered the carpeted corridor and were met by a suave old gentleman who asked them if they were foreigners or had any foreign currency. "No," said Boris, "but we've got this." He undid his dirty, paint-spattered shirt and produced a heavy ornamented gold cross.

"You are not going to gamble that?" asked the man.

"Why not! It's good gold, isn't it? I can be a Christian without a cross. Besides, I might win enough money to buy myself a hundred crosses."

"You might," said the man sadly. "Take it into the office."

The two young men walked into the indicated room, handed the cross over and waited for the clerk's evaluation.

"It's good unalloyed gold," said Boris. "Hundred per cent pure."

Take a bite at it. It comes off soft as soap. That's how you know gold," he remarked to Peter. "If it's unalloyed it's very soft." He took a bite at it and pretended to swallow a chip. "I wish it was mutton!"

The clerk looked at the two young men, thought them fools and offered a hundred roubles.

"Hey, hey," said Boris, "a hundred roubles. I make that much selling matches. Come on, brother. Come, name another price."

"Three hundred."

"What about five?"

The clerk weighed the cross dubiously in his hand. "Five," he said.

"But I don't agree. I only said what about it? A thousand is my mark. Take it or leave it."

"The country needs gold," the clerk muttered. "Here is a thousand. You are going in the casino?" he added.

"I don't know," teased Boris. "Shall we, Peter?"

Peter didn't reply.

"All right," said Boris, "give us a thousand and we'll have a flutter."

"How would you like it?"

"Ten rouble notes," said Boris maliciously.

The clerk painfully counted out a hundred notes and handed them over to Boris. They entered into a well-lit salon. Although it was only seven o'clock in the evening, it was crowded. Round the tables sat the *nouveau riches*; grocers, pimps, embezzlers, criminals. "Meet my uncle's Timothys!" said Boris.

Most of the men had women by their sides. They were dressed in pre-war fashions. The silks looked faded and creased. Somehow they contrived to look fashionable. A few of them wore flowers. The atmosphere in the room was mixed with cigarette smoke and faint perfumes, especially of leather. What astonished Peter most was the display of furs. Occasionally he heard an order for champagne.

"Well," said Boris, "this is one place the Revolution hasn't touched. I wish I had my easel. I feel you are right, Pyotr. This is the last of the old world. I'd like to slap them with a pot of paint."

The women were giggling and nudging their escorts. Occasionally a cheer would rise up from the gamblers. Money changed hands many times. Piles of well-worn rouble notes littered the tables. "Here," said Boris, "take a couple of hundred and try your luck."

The truth was that Boris wanted to enjoy himself. He felt a primitive urge to enter the merriment, to make some noise, to show off, to pretend he was rich, to get drunk on forgetfulness and, most especially, to flirt with a woman.

Peter took the two hundred roubles listlessly. He glanced round the room and saw that there were quite a number of policemen in plain clothes watching the players. "Why not?" he said to himself, "a man who can afford to come here must be a swindler. I hope they'll catch plenty of them!"

Boris wandered off by himself. He approached a large green baize table and pushing himself between a man and a woman flung

down his eight hundred roubles ostentatiously. "A hundred on twenty-one," he said.

The players did not bother to look up at the new-comer. They were engrossed in their chatter.

Boris lost. "Two hundred," he shouted. Again he lost. The third time he was lucky. He made six hundred roubles.

Stealthily, he looked at the women round the table. They were frousty. The paint on their lips was obviously home-made. He knew the trick. In some of the shops it was possible to buy red *crêpe* paper which, when licked, exuded enough colour to paint the lips. He wandered to another table. He was not surprised to see his uncle Timofey there.

The man welcomed his nephew with some surprise. "So," he said, "where have you found your money?"

"Sold my cross."

Uncle Timofey was horrified.

"But aren't you a Christian?" he cried. "It's a sin."

"Then give me another," said Boris. Suddenly he noticed his uncle's escort. She was sitting at the table, throwing thousand-rouble notes on to the roulette table. Occasionally she won. On those occasions she would look up at Uncle Timofey and smile, a vacant grin that seemed to satisfy the old man. "Well done, my little pigeon. Well done!" the rouble millionaire would pat her on her arm.

Boris saw the girl draw away from the old man's touch and elected himself as the fair one's rescuer. He looked down at his old clothes and felt a little ashamed. But what was to be done? He straightened out his frayed serge costume, tucked in one of the torn sleeves and did up the solitary button on his coat. "Aren't you going to introduce me?" he asked.

Uncle Timofey looked jealously at the young man. "Oh, yes, of course, if you want to. This is my . . ."

"Wife?" said Boris despairingly.

"Well, no," Uncle Timofey grinned, "a friend."

"A friend of the family I hope," said Boris facetiously. The old man did not like the double entendre.

But the girl, somewhat relieved at the arrival of a fresh personality, stretched out her hand. "Maria Andrevna Lavalila."

"Vousestes Française?" asked Boris. "Oh, what a beautiful country!"

The girl smiled. "My people were French but I was born in Russia."

He scrutinized her carefully. There was something familiar about her face. A fleeting familiarity. An uncommon face, he said to himself. Perhaps I've seen her in the streets. He made a mental note. "You enjoy gambling?"

"I enjoy anything to do with money," she answered.

Boris glanced at Uncle Timofey. "I understand," he said. "I have a thousand roubles. Perhaps you would play them for me? You seem to have brought my uncle luck. May I sit down?"

"By all means."

Uncle Timofey stood touching the chair on which Boris sat. He bent down and whispered something to the girl, but she shook her head.

"Do you often come here?" Boris asked the girl. Damn it, she is a beauty! he said to himself. She is lying, of course. She is a Russian. Those blue eyes and corn-yellow hair and all that sadness.

"Frequently. And you?"

"My first time," Boris admitted. "I sold the cross my god-parents gave me." What was the use of pretending he was rich. After all, he looked more attractive in his poverty than the bloated Nepmen who crowded the table. "I am a painter," he said melancholically. Here was an opportunity for deeper acquaintance. "You have an original face, mademoiselle . . . I was thinking . . ."

"That's a good idea!" Uncle Timofey burst in. "I'll give you a commission, my lad. A couple of thousand roubles if you paint Mademoiselle Lavalila. But paint her as she is. None of your modern tricks. I hate the stuff you young artists are slapping on your canvases these days. Cubes and engines, made up to look like human faces. In the old days . . ." he stopped himself abruptly and looked over his shoulder.

FOUR

PETER had grown bored with the company. The atmosphere in the room suffocated him both physically and morally. He would have liked to put most of these people under lock and key. There was no honesty about them. Their shifty swinish eyes were forever looking for gain. And Mishkin! What a stupid fellow he was. An old liberal that had fought well enough during the Revolution. What did he know about the future life? What did painters know anyway? It was only machines that mattered. It was only electricity that would count in the brave new world. Not all the fiddle faddle of the art schools. But Boris is no enemy of the people, Peter consoled himself. He is just young. Peter was one year older than his friend.

That evening, after he had been to the casino, Peter went to a meeting of the district Party committee. He did not bother to look on the agenda sheet and as he arrived late, he struck the last item on the discussion programme. An earnest young woman, dressed very neatly with a clean but crumpled dress, was speaking on the evils of prostitution.

"We thought," she said in a high nasal voice, "that equality of opportunity, work, and a measure of security would take the women from our streets. Why is it, I ask, comrades, that to-day in Moscow there are more prostitutes than in any other city in Russia, I was almost going to say, in the world."

"The answer is obvious," the Chairman replied. "We are in a period of transition. Providing there are idle men there will always

be idle women. Besides, it is not true to say that we have found work for all. We are only at the beginning of our industrialization. We must consider another factor. Many of the women belonged to the old bourgeoisie. They are unadapted to work. They have no professional training. But I am glad to report that the Government has opened its first Women's Curative-Labour Prophylactorium. We hope to recruit a number of these women in this institute, offer them a home, teach them some occupation and generally rehabilitate their self-esteem. It is only a beginning, comrades. But the problem is a pressing one, as Comrade Turganova has stressed."

"One is not enough," someone complained. "I was reading a book by Alexander Dumas quite recently. He visited Nishni Novgorod some years ago during the annual fair. Do you know what he calls that city? The city of prostitutes. He applies the same epithet to the former St. Petersburg, to many of our great towns. I am glad that the Government has recognized that prostitution starts from sheer economic need, from the fact that there is often nowhere to live and no work."

"In my opinion," interrupted Peter, "the majority of all street women come from the working classes. There are, of course, the remnants of the bourgeoisie. Well, let the Nepmen look after them."

"Hear, hear," chorused Comrade Turganova, "There is one correction that I would like to make, however, Comrade Kovalenko. You say that the majority of prostitutes are workers. That is a half-truth. Only five per cent of factory workers become victims. The greatest number are drawn from the needle trades. The workers in the factory have a greater sense of solidarity between them and help each other. But the needle-workers, before the Revolution that is, were not factory workers. They toiled long hours at low wages in small shops under the direct supervision of a boss who not infrequently was a procurer. As for housemaids, well, we know about them. They were doomed from the start. Let me tell you something else. The majority of the street walkers in Moscow are peasant girls. The famine, the difficulties in the rural districts bring them to the towns. We have inherited a terrible legacy from the Tsars."

"Good," said Peter, "I agree. What about a slogan?"

"Yes," said the Chairman, "we need a slogan."

"I suggest," said Peter, "fight prostitution, not the prostitute." A burst of clapping greeted this suggestion.

"I am certain," said the Chairman, "that the People's Commissariat of Health will accept Comrade Kovalenko's slogan."

FIVE

THE young girl won heavily with Boris's money. But every time she put on the bet for Uncle Timofey, she lost. "My angel of fortune," Boris began calling her, "how wonderful you play!" He pocketed his winnings greedily.

Uncle Timofey growled behind the chair and again bent down to whisper to the girl. But she shook her head more vigorously and refused to hear his pleadings. "Wouldn't you get me some champagne?" she asked. "I am so thirsty. The excitement of the game always makes me thirsty."

"Let me buy you some champagne!" Boris cried impulsively.

"I am afraid it will be hopeless," she answered. "You have no foreign currency, have you? Or another gold cross?"

"No," said Boris.

Uncle Timofey bowed at his nephew's defeat and called over to one of the waiters rather patronizingly. "Bring me some magnum!" he said.

The waiter, dressed in a threadbare garment of his trade, hustled off to obey the order.

"What are you going to do with all the money you have won?" the elder man asked, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Oh, I shall buy paints, a new easel and some brushes. And perhaps I will be able to afford some of your cakes, Uncle."

"Oh come, my boy, don't make me out to be so stingy. You can come and have cakes every day you are in Moscow. I suppose you are feeling tired and would like to go home? Once you have seen the casino, there is not much to it. And I am sure you don't want to lose all your winnings. Mademoiselle Lavalila has certainly been a goddess of luck to you. I would go whilst the going is good."

Boris pretended to take the hint, but before he rose from the baize table he pressed his knee against the girl. She did not reply to his pressure, but Boris thought he could see a slight smile growing on her lips. His heart began to flutter. "Well, good-bye, Uncle," he said, getting up. "Good-bye. And thank you very much." He rushed off before the astonished man could reprimand him for his lack of manners. He had not said good-bye to his escort.

But there was no need to say good-bye. Mademoiselle Lavalila watched the young man stride out of the door and then, making some excuse to her partner, she got up from the table. His eyes followed her greedily to the ladies' room. He enjoyed her light walk, the delicate bend of her shoulders. And with a glass of champagne fixed to his mouth, he gulped the delicious bubbles thinking, planning. . . .

They all asked for foreign currency. But he had a few gold sovereigns and Swiss francs. And she was worth it.

He sat down to play. He won with his own money. Then he lost everything and won again. Half an hour passed but Mademoiselle Lavalila did not return. She managed to pass through the salon unnoticed and to join Boris outside on the pavement. "How cold it is!" she said shuddering. And then: "Where shall we go?"

"I am afraid I don't know fashionable Moscow very well," said Boris. "I come from Leningrad. We always considered Moscow a large village. Perhaps you can suggest a place."

"Well, what do you say to the Grand Hotel? That's about the gayest spot I can think of."

"Do you want to be gay?"

"Well, I have been sad most of the evening."

"Oh really? I am sorry. Was it my fault?"

"Are you fishing for a compliment? Well, perhaps you are. Here, take this," she pressed something into Boris's hands. He felt the contours of the object in the darkness.

"A cross," he said, "my gold cross. How did you get it?"

"Very simply. I bought it back for many times its worth with some foreign currency I had. It's quite simple really."

"Oh no, no," said Boris. "It's yours. Really, I couldn't take it."

"But please do. It must mean a lot to you. Besides, it's a sin to sell a cross. It's the very last thing you should part with, the very last thing!" she emphasized.

They walked down towards the Grand Hotel without speaking to each other. But a fine understanding seemed to have grown up between them in these few minutes. Her generous gesture had touched his heart. He felt deeply indebted to her, and crushed all his early feelings of precarious flirtation. Consequently, he felt very sorry for himself and for the girl that walked by his side.

In an attempt to cheer himself up, he said: "It's a pity I didn't taste my uncle's champagne. He is disgustingly rich, isn't he?" He pulled himself up when he realized the indelicacy of the question. "I mean, he is obviously so, isn't he?"

"You haven't offended me," said the girl. "There is no need to keep the pretence up any longer. Yes, I am just what you think I am."

He began to speak.

"Please don't apologize for me!"

"No," he said, "I won't. I apologize for the times we are living in, times I have helped to create." He gritted his teeth.

"Don't blame yourself. It isn't your fault. But where is it all leading us to?"

"The devil knows," said Boris.

They paused at the entrance of the Grand Hotel. "You know," said the girl, "I am frightened that your uncle might come and look for me here. All the Nepmen and their girls hover between the casino and the Grand. Don't you think, perhaps, we ought to go somewhere else? To a restaurant? Surely there is some students' café nearby."

"Well," said Boris dubiously. What he meant by that 'well' was that he did not want to meet Peter Kovalenko with the girl. He would accuse him of being anti-social or something equally stupid.

"I am afraid the place I go to," he apologized, "is full of Makhorka smells. We students can only afford Makhorka and I am sure it would make you sneeze. I am sorry I am so helpless; but, as I say, I am a stranger in the town."

"You are no more of a stranger than I am. I have lived here for three years and, believe me, I haven't got a roof over my head."

"Oh, that's dreadful," Boris exclaimed. "That's terrible. And you are so beautiful. Have you tried to find work?"

"I have tried everything. I was shut up in a house for a year. They taught me how to speak well, and good manners. But I couldn't stand it for long. I preferred the freedom of the streets. At least there is the sky and clean air. And I have been lucky, anyway. I found a place to go to every night."

"Well," said Boris, "if it's like that, I can offer you a bed. It's nothing more than that. But there are seven other people living in the room. But you are quite welcome. I'll sleep with my friend." Then he paused and thought for a while. "You know, the bed hasn't got any sheets. And the blankets, they are not exactly clean. I make a pillow out of my coat; still, if you would accept my hospitality. . . ."

"Why not?" the girl laughed. "You know, I have often wanted to be a student too. Life makes you want to learn, to understand what's behind it all. There is a young doctor I know. He is training to be a surgeon. He has wonderful books in his library full of plates, showing peoples' insides. I'd like to learn something like that. I was a nurse once. Perhaps that's why."

As they walked down the Tverskaya to the apartment house, Boris noticed that the girl would stop periodically and rub her hands. "You are anæmic," he said, "that's why you are cold. Here, take my coat and put it over your shoulders."

"I don't need it," the girl replied. "I have a fur."

The pathetic thing she called a fur was worn almost bald. Boris had not seen it at the casino. He had noticed only the faded silk dress with pieces of torn lace which made up the bodice. But in the darkness as he threw his coat round her shoulders, he felt the pathetic fur.

"You poor little thing!" he said, "*bednashka*—poor little one. And to think that you might have gone to Uncle Timofey's well-warmed house and eaten caviar with him this evening. Really, you are quite stupid," he said cynically.

"And to think," she returned, "that you might have earned two thousand roubles if you had painted me!"

"Yes, it's odd," Boris agreed. "But when one is very poor one can afford the luxury of throwing away two thousand roubles. All right, supposing I had them. I would spend them and I would never see you again."

"Oh, does that really matter very much to you?" she asked.

Boris was touched, perhaps even a little offended by the sincerity in her voice. "You know," he answered, "I have an idea. I'll take you to the art school to-morrow. They'll pay you a few roubles for posing. I get a grant. Not much, but it just keeps body and soul together. You might study, for example. There are plenty of things a woman can do. And we can live together. Brr, it's cold. Let's buy a little vodka! It will keep you warm at night. The blankets are awfully thin."

They passed a little *kaback* and Boris, disentangling his arm from the girl, was about to dive in to buy his vodka. But no sooner did he let go of the girl than he seized her again.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"I am afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid that when I go in there you will disappear. Look, come near the door. Put your foot inside so that I can see it."

The girl obeyed dutifully with a short laugh. Boris retreated backwards into the smoke-filled den, keeping his eyes glued on the door out of which peeped a small feminine foot, and asked for vodka over his shoulder. He was handed a small bottle and, without taking his gaze off the foot, paid with a hundred-rouble note and dashed out.

"You see, I am still here," the girl said. "I thought for a moment I'd take my shoe off and hide behind the post. But it was too cold."

They walked arm-in-arm. "I'll put the vodka into my fur," the girl said, "to warm it up."

Boris laughed. "You don't have to put it inside your fur. You should put it inside yourself, then it will be warm."

The girl pulled the bottle out of her fur and gave it to him. He removed the cork with his teeth and offered the vodka to her. He heard a soft gurgle in the darkness and then a splutter of protest. "My, it's like living coals."

Without wiping the bottle, he put it to his mouth, feeling a delicious sense of proximity with the girl. They walked on.

By the time they reached the apartment they were a little tipsy, warmly so. Boris guided her through the darkness of the corridor and up the wooden steps. "We live on the third floor," he said. "Hold close to me or we will get lost. And be careful of the steps. Some are missing. We have negotiated the journey so far, I'd hate to lose you down a rat-hole." The girl followed him blindly in the darkness, tripping occasionally, but righting herself with a laugh.

They entered the apartment room on tiptoe. A volley of snores greeted them. There was a slight stench of human beings, for the windows were closely shut. Now and again someone murmured in his sleep. Boris guided himself and the girl by instinct through the different cubicles until he reached his corner. Then, groping for the bed, he tugged at the girl's sleeve. "Here," he said, "I am afraid you will have to go to bed without washing."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. I can go to the baths to-morrow."

"Good." There was an awkward pause. "Do you mind," Boris said, "if I kiss you?"

The girl moved towards him. She stood on tiptoes to reach his face and he could feel her warm breath near his lips. There was an aroma of vodka. That's why Boris kissed her on the forehead.

SIX

BORIS groped through the next partition to Peter's bed. Peter was already asleep. Without waking him, Boris lay down beside his friend on the extreme edge of the bed.

He spent a fitful night on the broken springs, moving carefully not to wake Peter. He was waiting for dawn anxiously, eagerly, listening pleasurably as he heard the girl settle herself down and whisper a timid "good night".

He wanted to be by her side, to embrace her, to share her dreams.

It was bitterly cold. So he periodically took a small gulp of vodka till the fumes overpowered him and he slept.

SEVEN

PETER woke his friend with a gentle shove which landed Boris on the floor. "Wake up, you camel," he said irritably. "You were so drunk last night that you crept into the wrong bed. Wake up!" He shook him fiercely.

Boris got up, suddenly wide awake. "Shshsh . . ." he said mysteriously.

Peter lowered his voice. "What's the matter with you? Haven't you slept the vodka out of your system yet?"

"Shsh . . ." Boris commanded again. "Please be quiet."

"Have you gone mad, you gambler?" Peter taunted him. "What's up?"

"Someone is asleep. Keep quiet, I don't want to wake her yet."

Peter's ears pricked up. "So," he said, "you have been playing the Barin—the Cavalier."

"The fact is," Boris whispered, "there is a girl in my bed. She is very tired. For mercy's sake, walk quietly."

The two men got up on their feet. Peter was frankly curious. "Can I look at her?" he asked.

"Yes, but on your toes," Boris cautioned.

He walked over to the partition, followed closely by Peter, and pulled back the draping, casting a menacing glance over his shoulder at his friend at the same time.

But there was no need for the silence. The bed was empty. Boris's heart sank like a stone.

"You are drunk" said Peter, and burst out laughing.

At that moment the door opened and the girl came into the room. She was carrying some food wrapped up in newspaper. A large crusty loaf and some white bacon. The two men had their backs to her. She saw them gazing at her bed and smiled to herself. Then, tiptoeing up behind them, she said in an exaggeratedly loud voice: "Good morning, comrades."

The men span round. "Peter!" the girl cried.

"Olga! What are you doing here? Olga, my dear." The brother and sister fell into each other's arms and kissed fervently.

"Oh, I say," Boris protested.

"Boris, dear, this is my brother!" the girl explained happily.

Peter pulled himself up. "Is she the . . ." he said, without finishing his sentence.

The girl looked at Boris, almost imploringly. But the words were already out of his mouth. "Why, yes. I had no idea you knew each other. Otherwise . . ."

"This is my sister Olga, Boris," said Peter laconically. He looked at her torn silk dress and understood. "She is a nurse," he said, trying to convince himself. "You are a nurse, aren't you, Olga?"

"She is going to be my wife!" said Boris boldly, trying to put on the best face he could. "Aren't you, Olga?"

"I don't know," the girl said listlessly. She thrust out the bread and the bacon to the two men. "Let us have breakfast now." In a matter-of-fact voice she added: "You must be hungry."

Peter's brain was in a whirl. He was furious with Boris, but still more angry with his sister. "You deceived us," he said; "we thought you were in a hospital. We thought you were doing honourable work."

"Shut up!" shouted Boris. "If I hear one more insult I'll punch you."

"Never mind," said the girl hopelessly, "let him say what he wants to."

"Is it a sin, trying to live?" Boris yelled. "You blasted puritan."

"Why did you leave the hospital?" Peter demanded sternly, taking no notice of his friend's expostulations.

"I was tired of it. I was sick of it," the girl explained. "The filth, the misery. I've seen so much blood, so much blood. I couldn't stand it any longer."

"So you became a whore!" said Peter crudely.

Boris launched out at him with his fist and hit him squarely on the shoulder. The girl interposed between the two men. "Really," she said, "I am not worth a quarrel. The word doesn't hurt any more. I've said it often to myself." She turned round to go.

"Where are you going?" shouted Boris. "Do you think because this idiot, this short-sighted idiot insults you, I am going to let you go? Do you think I am going to let you slip out of my life on a technicality?"

Olga reached the door, but Boris hurried over to her and putting his arm round her shoulder pulled her savagely to him.

"A nice pair!" said Peter coldly. "Yes. Where did you think you were going, Olga?"

The girl did not answer for a moment. "I am going to your uncle Timofey, Boris." Then, squirming out of Boris's fierce hold she said: "I am going to your uncle. At least he has the good manners not to call me names but to accept me for what I am. Do you think I am the only woman in Moscow, Peter, who has had to do this?"

"But you are a peasant girl," Peter replied a little more kindly. "You don't belong to the city. Go back home. They have rebuilt their house. There will be much to do on the farm. I promise if you go back I shall say nothing. That's a fair offer."

"Is she asking for offers from you?" Boris asked fiercely. "Don't listen to him, Olga. Do what you want to do."

"Don't listen to this anarchist!" Peter pleaded. "I warn you. Here, take this money." He took out his last eighty roubles. "Take a train home. I'll send a letter saying that you were sick and have decided to give up your nursing."

The girl did not take the proffered money. Peter advanced towards her and pushed it into her hand. "Take it, Olga," he said grimly, "or you will regret it!"

"Come!" said Boris. "We don't have to stand here and listen to his nonsense. The fact is, Comrade Kovalenko, that I have taken responsibility for your sister. You can therefore mind your own business."

"You! You have taken responsibility for her. You delegate to yourself this right which belongs only to society."

"And what has society done for her?" asked Boris bitterly. "I'll tell you what society has done for her. It has let her go cold and hungry, without a roof, dependent on the single whim of a man like Uncle Timofey. If your revolution had any sense, it would have found room for a person like her. You would send her back to the farm as if she was a cow!"

"That's where she came from!" said Peter. "What's wrong in a farm?"

"Nothing is wrong in a farm," Boris retorted. "For those who are born and bred on it and stay on it and limit their horizon to the waving acres. But Olga wants to be a student. She wants to learn."

"There are schools in the villages now," said Peter. "Her desire for knowledge can be satisfied there."

"But do you think she wants to learn the alphabet with a lot of mangy peasants? She wants to take up medicine, don't you, Olga?"

"Yes," Olga replied uncertainly. "That's what I want to do." She thought that this was the best avenue of escape.

"All right," said Peter, "she can take up medicine." The threat in his voice was apparent, yet mysterious. Boris and the girl looked at each other and shuddered.

"We are not cornered yet," said Boris. "He can't force you to go back to the farm. Come, let's go to my art school. You can earn a few roubles, as I said before."

"You dirty pimp!" Peter shouted at him, misunderstanding what Boris meant. "You dare to live on my sister's earnings."

Boris and Peter clutched at each other's lapels. They looked into each other's eyes and killed each other in their imagination, utterly annihilating one another from the face of the earth. Then Peter released his hold and turned contemptuously away.

EIGHT

BORIS and Olga rushed out of the apartment like two children. They ran down the Tverskaya hand in hand. Only when they were finally out of breath, did they stop and look at each other. They felt like

prisoners escaping from gaol. "Well," said Boris, "there is only one thing to do. You must marry me. Your brother was in a desperate mood. I feel he is up to some mischief. Let's cheat him!"

"Do you really want to marry me?" asked Olga. "Or is it an impulse on your part? Is it pity?"

"No," said Boris, "if it was pity I would have proposed that you left the city and went to another. No. It's because I feel lonely and so do you. We will get on well together."

"That's as good a reason as any other. Well, where do we begin?" If Olga was honest with herself, she would have refused to marry the earnest young man. But she felt cornered and defeated. She didn't know where to turn to, and her brother's threat hung over her so that she felt dumb, powerless to resist.

"You know," she said, "there is one difficulty. All my clothes are at your Uncle Timofey's house. We cannot begin married life," she laughed, "with this apology for an evening dress. I have a pair of shoes, some warm underwear and a coat."

"Well," said Boris, "I'll go and fetch them. I am not afraid of him. What can he do to me?"

"No," said Olga, "I think it would be better if I went. If I explain to him, he might understand. He might even help us. He might . . ." she hesitated, "even let me take some of the jewellery he gave me."

"Olga, I refuse those conditions. We must begin anew. We want nothing from Uncle Timofey. He can go to blazes."

"Very well. But I must have my clothes. We can't avoid meeting him. Come, let's go together; let's go hand in hand."

"I know," said Boris, "let's pretend we are married. That will flabbergast him."

Timofey Trepov lived over one of his shops, not the bakery, but the second-hand clothes' shop which, during this Nep period, was doing remarkably good business. The co-operatives sponsored by the Government had not yet become dangerous competitors.

They walked into the shop together and asked for the proprietor. The clerk, an obsequious young fellow, bent low before Olga, although at the same time he glanced suspiciously at Boris. "The master is still in bed," he said; "perhaps you can wait. I shall send a message to him that you have called."

"Don't bother. We'll go up." Pushing aside the clerk, the two of them mounted the stairs and walked up to Uncle Timofey's room. They knocked surreptitiously and waited for the 'come in.' Olga was the first to enter and the old man was deceived for a moment. He thought she had come alone. "Ah," he said, "so you have returned. You know what's good for you."

He was lying in an enormous double feather-bed, sunk amidst a mountain of snowy pillows. On his bald head he wore a coloured night-cap. When he saw Boris, he shrieked helplessly: "Get out of my room. Get out, you ungrateful hound!"

"We will get out presently," said Boris boldly. "You kindly address me and my wife with more civility."

"Your wife!" roared Uncle Timofey, "what a joke! What a paralyzing funny joke! Have you married him?" he asked Olga sternly.

"Yes," she faltered.

"So much the worse for you!" he answered. "And what do you want?"

"My clothes."

"Your clothes!" Uncle Timofey answered. "Your clothes indeed. Who picked you naked out of the gutter? Who had you washed with soap, expensive soap too. The last in my drawer. Who put stockings on your frozen feet? Who warmed you at his breast. Timofey, Uncle Timofey now. An old man. Take her!" he shouted to Boris. "Take your lady love and get out of here. But know," he added maliciously, "that you have her warm from my bed."

Boris sprang on the old man and seized him by the throat. He would have pressed the life out of him but for Olga's quick action. She bit Boris's hand savagely. "For God's sake! We are in enough trouble as it is. Do you want to be accused of murder?"

Boris released his hold. "You fat swine," he said, "I am sorry I cannot kill you. But one day you and your dirty shops and your swindles will be discovered and you will suffer. To think I am related to you!" He raised his hand to beat the old man.

"Now, now," Uncle Timofey squeaked, thoroughly frightened. "Now, Boris. Have pity for my age. I am sorry I was harsh to you, my lad. I didn't mean it. But every man is jealous. You must understand that. Good luck to you both, good luck," he said fervently, "take your clothes, Olga, and go. God bless you. Here, my boy, here is some money for you." He handed him a five-thousand rouble note.

"I'll take it," said Boris. "That will surprise you. I am no bedroom hero. I have done enough dirty work for you."

Olga hurriedly packed her clothes into a bundle, wrapping them up in brown paper, and ran out of the room. Outside in the passage they met the clerk, still his obsequious smiling self. "Greetings," he said, as they passed him.

NINE

WITH his five-thousand-rouble note thrust deep down in his pocket, Boris and Olga hurried to the Registry Office. It was a bare quarter of an hour's walk. They would have taken one of the trams but they were crowded and, in any case, they were filled with a sense of exhilaration.

"With careful economy," Boris was saying, "we can live for a couple of months. In the meantime I must look for some spare-time work."

"I'll do the same," Olga replied enthusiastically. "We'll get through somehow." Then she stopped. "What are you marrying me for, Boris?" she asked suddenly.

"Because I love you. That's simple."

Unmindful of the package in her hands, the two of them embraced each other in the middle of the street. Passers-by stopped and looked at the couple and actually smiled. The winter was coming to an end, they said to themselves. Soon it would be May and Moscow would be warmer.

They ran breathlessly up the stairs of the Registry Office, pushed through a crowd in the ante-room and made their way to the Certificate Office. "My, you are in a hurry to get married," said the Registrar. "Show your passes, please!"

Simultaneously, Boris and Olga produced theirs, looked at each other and threw them down on the clerk's desk. "Hurry, hurry," Boris urged.

"Names?" asked the clerk smilingly.

"Boris Mishkin and Olga Kovalenko, comrade," he replied.

The clerk pricked up his ears. "Just one moment," he said, "I have run out of forms." He rose, casting a cautious glance over his shoulder at the couple and went into the next room.

"In a minute or two," said Boris, "we will be married. We will really be married." They looked round the room, curiously, satisfied and a little nervous.

Presently the door opened and the clerk came in, followed by Peter and two other men. "This is Olga Kovalenko," the clerk said, pointing to the girl.

The two men by Peter's side advanced.

"Yes," said Peter, identifying her, "that is Olga Kovalenko." Boris stood dumbfounded, unable to move. He watched the two men approach Olga.

"Comrade," said the senior of the men, "we are from the People's Commissariat of Health. Will you come with us."

"Where are you taking me to?" Olga demanded. "What do you want from me? I haven't done anything wrong."

"The order has been issued by the Commissariat," the man replied. "Will you kindly comply. There is no need to be afraid."

"Where are they taking me to?" Olga asked Boris. "Boris, help me!"

Boris flung himself at Peter. "This is all your doing," he screamed. "What are they doing with her? Where are they taking her to?"

The two men gently took hold of Olga and began leading her out of the room. "Peter, Peter," Boris prayed, "for the sake of the old days. For the dangers we went through together. For the past, tell me what are they going to do with Olga? Who are they?"

"There is no need to get worried," Peter replied not unkindly. "Olga is going where she can be looked after. Where she can be made into a human being again, given a chance to become a useful member of society. She is being sent to the Women's Curative-Labour Prophylactorium."

Olga stifled a sob with her hand. "They are taking me to prison," she said calmly. "But I have done nothing wrong. Good-bye, Boris. And thank you, thank you,"

The two men led her out. "Oh, my God!" said Boris, "what a beast you are. Your own sister. Oh, you dreadful Communist, you murderer; is nothing, nothing sacred to you?"

"The people are sacred to us," Peter replied. "Do you think it was easy for me to accuse my sister of being a prostitute? But it will be better for her. And if you love her, you ought to be glad. Please understand. It's for her good!"

Boris sprang savagely at his tormentor. He did not understand a word he had said. "I'll kill you for this," he screamed, "I'll kill you!"

TEN

BORIS returned to the apartment, weeping, biting his lips with rage, swearing aloud, plotting, not knowing what to do. He had spent the whole morning at the People's Commissariat of Health. They had told him that Olga had been sentenced to three years in a Prophylactorium. They tried to console him, explaining that the detention was not punitive. She would be looked after, put on a good diet, taught to pursue a craft or some study. Doctors would watch over her. She was a lucky person, they told him.

But Boris considered this explanation nothing short of a mockery. It was Peter's jealousy. The Prophylactorium is nothing more than a prison. Three years, three long years. . . . He kept on mumbling to himself. Then the thought flashed through his head. Perhaps it wasn't Peter, perhaps it was Uncle Timofey. Anyway, he would find out. He sprang up from his bed and went to his uncle's shop.

No sooner had he entered than he was seized. He offered no resistance but stared blankly at the scene which met his eyes. The shop was crowded with militiamen. There were a number of persons in plain clothes as well. He knew they were from the Cheka. A small man with a beard and pince-nez approached him. "You are Comrade Boris Mishkin, are you not?"

Boris nodded.

"Your uncle, Timofey Trepov, has been murdered."

Boris started. A smile spread over his face. "Good," he said.

The examiner ignored the remark. "I believe, Comrade Mishkin, that you came to his apartment this morning in the company of a woman." He looked down at his notes. "The woman was Olga Kovalenko, one-time mistress of the merchant. Is that right?"

"Quite right," said Boris. "What's that got to do with me?"

"The clerk, working in Timofey Trepov's shop, by name of Ignati Prudin, testifies that you quarrelled with your uncle over this woman. He said that you shouted at him, that you threatened to kill him. He also testifies that shortly after you left, he went into your uncle's room and found him dead. He then informed the police."

"I didn't kill him," Boris replied. "But I am not sorry that he is dead."

"That doesn't throw any helpful light on the murder, comrade. You'd better tell us everything you know."

Boris smiled with relief. "I know very little," he said. Inside, he felt a strange numbness coming over him. He had a feeling of security, of not caring. He was almost pleased to be accused of murder. It would take his mind off the other tragedy which he had witnessed that morning. "Look," he said to the Governor, "if it makes things easier for you, I'll confess to the murder. What will you do with me? Shoot me? Hang me?"

"Comrade, this is not a question of deciding your sentence. In any case, capital punishment has been abolished except for treason. The worst you can get is ten years in a prison or in Siberia. But tell us what made you kill the merchant. Was it jealousy? Or were you after his money?"

"His money?" said Boris. "Jealousy? Why should I be jealous. I was going to marry the girl. Besides, he gave me five thousand roubles." He put his hand in his pocket and drew out the five-thousand-rouble note.

The Examiner took it out of his hand gently, looked at it and handed it over to a militia man. "I am afraid," he said to Boris, "we shall have to hold you during investigations. You will be given a defending counsel or you can choose one if you prefer. You will be free to receive visitors and to write letters. Is there any request you would care to make?"

"Yes," said Boris, "please don't implicate Olga in this. She had nothing to do with it, I swear it. And, if possible, don't let her know anything about my arrest."

ELEVEN

WHEN Boris did not return that evening, Peter grew worried. He knew nothing of his arrest. He waited up the whole night, conjuring up various possibilities. Was it probable that Boris was, after all, deeply in love with his sister? How could that be after one day's meeting? He who had so little room for love in his life, tried to imagine it, but failed.

Well, if Boris was such a sentimentalist, so weak-kneed, what would he do? Commit suicide? A bourgeois decision. Finally, not being able to sleep, he got up at four o'clock in the morning, dressed himself hurriedly and went out into the Tverskaya. The obvious place to go, he thought, was to Boris's uncle's shop. It was possible that he could explain the disappearance of his nephew.

Peter, who did not know of the merchant's death, did not savour very much an interview with the Nepman. But he shrugged his shoulders. After all, these people are only making hay whilst the sun shines. They are the last of the brood.

When he reached the shop he found the shutters down. There was an official seal on the door. Peter could hardly understand it.

He knocked once or twice and waited. After a few moments he heard the shuffling of feet and a small grating opened. The clerk's face peered out at him and asked him what was his business.

"Is the merchant Trepov in?" Peter asked. "I have come about his nephew."

"Trepov?" said the clerk. "Trepov has been murdered and the nephew has been arrested."

"It's impossible," cried Peter. "It's quite impossible. Why should Boris murder him? It was me he was angry with."

"Well," said the clerk, "I don't want to hear your evidence. Give it to the Court. He will be tried in a few days' time."

But Peter was not satisfied. He put his fist through and got hold of the man's shoulders. "Listen, open the door. I've got some questions to ask."

"You can go to hell." The man struggled but couldn't release himself from Peter's vice-like grip. "I can't open the door, damn you. Can't you see it is sealed?"

"Well, and how do you get out?"

"By the back way," the man snivelled.

"Very well," said Peter, "let me in by the back way. A lot of use it was of the militia to seal this door I must say. How do I get round to the back?"

The man pulled himself away and slammed the grating. Peter cursed, and pulled out his fingers which the clerk had intentionally jammed in. He decided to walk round the block, but then a thought struck him. The only person who could throw any light on Timofey's murder would be his sister.

It took him more than an hour to walk to the Prophylactorium. At first he was refused admittance, but he showed his Party card and explained the nature of his business. One of the doctors (doctors all over the world are the same) explained that it was highly irregular that comrade Kovalenko should be woken up. She had been given a sleeping draught to ease her nerves.

But Peter insisted. "A man's fate depends on it. I must see her."

"Very well," said the doctor. "But only for a few minutes. She seems to be suffering from some sort of mental unbalance and further excitement may have serious consequences."

"I'll have to take the risk," said Peter.

They led him to a small room, bare, with whitewashed walls. Olga was sleeping serenely but her hands clutched the sheets in periodic nervous spasms. "You can leave us alone," said Peter to the doctor.

He put his hand gently on Olga's forehead and caressed her. "Olga," he whispered, "it's Peter."

She opened her eyes widely and shrank from him. "Where am I? Oh, you! You beast! Go away from me. Go away," she screamed.

Peter held her right hand firmly in his. "Olga, Boris has been arrested for murder. For Timofey's murder. Did he kill him?"

She pulled herself away from Peter. "A murder? It's impossible. He didn't murder him. I swear he didn't."

"Did he use any violence on him at all?" asked Peter cautiously.

She was much quieter now. "Yes; but he didn't kill him. I pulled him away in time." Then she added, suspiciously: "But why are you asking me this? Are you trying to get him sent away to Siberia? Oh, Pyotr, Pyotr." She broke down into helpless sobs.

"Listen, Olga, I know it's difficult for you to believe. But I love you. And Boris is my friend. What I did to-day I did for both your sakes. You are not yourself. They'll heal you in the Prophylactorium. They will give you an interest in life."

"But I found an interest in life. I love Boris. Can't you understand that?"

"No," said Peter, "frankly, I can't. But I believe you when you say that he didn't murder Trepov."

"But who did? Who did?" she wailed.

"That's what I am going to find out if you will help me. Now, pull yourself together and tell me calmly everything that happened."

Olga smoothed the tears from her eyes and then folded her hands. She told him everything in a quiet impassionate voice. She even told him how they had passed the clerk on the stairs.

"The clerk?" said Peter, "that's very curious. He must have heard the row in Trepov's room and hurried up. I think I am beginning to see light. Now, you go to sleep. I have business to do."

"Promise me one thing," she said, "you have done this evil to me. But save Boris. He is blameless. And if you see him again, tell him I love him. Tell him that I shall think of him during the next three long years. I shall love him as much as I shall hate you."

"I understand," said Peter. "Good-bye, Olga!"

The girl sank back on the pillows, exhausted. Peter tiptoed out. Without bothering to speak to the doctor, he left the Prophylactorium.

He returned to the Trepov house and once again circled the block. He discovered that the houses had been built round a square and he guessed that it was in this square that the back entrance of the Trepov shop could be found. But the problem was how to get into it. Well, he said to himself, how would a bird do it? She'd fly over the roof. That's what I must do.

Casting a hurried glance round him, Peter scrambled up a post which led to a thick iron drain-pipe. He began climbing up. His foothold was never sure. But the house he had chosen was a particularly high one of six storeys.

Fortunately for him, the roofs were flat, and by carefully counting the houses he was able to judge which was Trepov's roof. He looked round for some exit and found a small attic window. Fortunately for him, the glass had been broken, enough, at least, to allow the passage of a man's body.

He slid down silently and cautiously into the dark room. For a moment he hung in space, afraid to jump. What if this attic window shone on the stairs? That would mean he would drop like a stone to the ground. Well, he had to take his chance. He dropped. Flop!

The fall was much shorter than he imagined. Three or four feet.

No more. He found himself in a small, musty room. There were packages everywhere, bales of clothes and chests, obviously the merchant's store-room. He groped across the goods trying to feel for the door.

It took him some minutes to realize that there was no door. That in reality it was the top landing. He was quite right. Had he jumped a few feet sideways, he would have fallen down between the spiral stairs. The boards creaked frighteningly. But he expected the little clerk to be downstairs.

Walking down on tiptoe, he reached the first floor. A noise from a right-hand room revealed that someone was busy moving furniture about. Peter decided to surprise the industrious furniture mover. He put his hand on the door quietly and, turning the handle, flung it open.

There, crouched on the floor, amongst innumerable packing-cases, sat the clerk. He held a small crowbar in his hand; evidently he had been opening crates.

"Hallo," said Peter.

The man got up menacingly, gripping his crowbar firm in his hand. "What do you want here?"

"I've just come to pay you a visit."

"You have come to steal."

"Well, what of it? What are you doing if not stealing?"

"These goods belong to me as much as to Trepov. I put plenty of money and hard work into the business. But he kept me downstairs in the shop whilst he luxuriated with his mistress up here."

Peter put his hand into his pocket and looked intently at the clerk. Shifty eyes, he thought. The man was obviously a liar. He hated him from the first moment. The face was pock-marked and yellow. His whole body was slightly bent. He had probably spent most of his life in the counting-house. He had a repulsive head. It was a little too big for his body and his mouth was thick and squelched like a bad fruit whenever he spoke.

"What have you got in your pocket?" he asked Peter cautiously. "A revolver?"

"No," said Peter. He was working out an idea in his head. "Listen, I don't know what your name is, but I have to make a proposition. I am working for another man down the road. When he heard of Trepov's death he thought we could do a deal. What about selling us some of your clothes?"

The man sighed with obvious relief. "Ah," he said, "that's different. I don't know about selling the clothes. But I know that last week Trepov bought a lot of butter cheap. I am closing the bakery and want to concentrate on clothes. If you can get me some, I can give you some butter."

"Won't you take money for it?" asked Peter.

"No. What's the use of money to me? I cannot sell it."

"Well, you are a good business man," Peter pretended to be speaking admiringly. "I wouldn't be surprised if you couldn't make a better job of it than Trepov. By the way, how did he die?"

The man became cautious again. "How should I know? Strangled, I think."

Peter looked down at the clerk's thick hairy hands. "Listen," he said, "I've just heard a rumour. They say that this man they have arrested accuses you of murder. He says that you were standing on the staircase whilst he quarrelled with Trepov and then, taking advantage of the row, came in and killed the old merchant. Now I'll give you a friendly tip. The militia thinks there is something in this. If I were you, I'd pack up and run."

"Ha, ha," the man laughed, "don't try and scare me. You only want my goods."

"Well, let's make a deal," said Peter. "We'll buy some of your goods and the rest we can send on to you. What do you say to that? Oh, and by the way, you know that girl that was with Trepov? She was asking about you."

"I thought so," said the man. "Just like a woman. Now I've got the money, I suppose she is interested in me. Well, she is a pretty little girl and I wouldn't mind having her myself."

Peter was furious that he should have given this foul-mouthed thief a chance to use his sister's name.

"Besides, I bet she is glad he is dead."

"Look," said Peter, "what do I see?" He pointed to the man's shoe. "Blood!"

The clerk bent down hurriedly, his face taking on a deadly pallor. "Blood?" he said. "How could there be?"

"Oh, I am so sorry. It was a shadow. You are much too clever to have spilt blood."

The man smiled cautiously. "You are a bright lad," he complimented Peter, "but not clever enough to catch me out." He laughed nervously and turned to his packing.

"Ah, come on, you are amongst friends. Trepov was a competitor, my boss says. He is out of the way and we can do business with you providing you are reasonable." He bent down to peep into one of the crates that the clerk had prised open.

Just as he was about to pull a piece of cloth out of the crate, he saw the clerk's shadow looming ominously on his left. Peter turned round swiftly and saw the crowbar descending on his head. His quick reaction saved him. The heavy bar crashed through the wooden crate as Peter kicked the clerk sharply in the stomach.

Then, before the man could get up, Peter sprang on him and putting his hands on the quaking man's throat, he began to apply a steady pressure. "So, you were going to kill me? What is there to stop me killing you? You killed the merchant Trepov; I kill you and have all this."

The clerk spluttered a prayer. "You can have half of this. I swear, you can have half of this. Yes, I killed Trepov. But there is no reason why we shouldn't be able to do business together. No reason at all."

"Now you are more reasonable," said Peter, getting off the man's chest. "Come, my boss wants to see you."

He led the unsuspecting clerk to the militia station and, holding his right arm tightly, he pushed him into the Public Prosecutor's office. "The man that killed the merchant Trepov, Comrade Public Prosecutor," he said.

The terrified murderer tried to escape, but Peter was too quick for him. He seized him by the collar and held him like a mad dog. After a moment he ceased struggling and said with an almost satisfied sigh: "Well, at least they won't kill me. That's something. Ten years aren't as long as for ever."

That same day Boris was released. He was never to know the service that Peter had done for him. Furious and full of black hatred for his friend, he left Moscow for Leningrad.

TWELVE

LIKE ants returning to a broken ant-hill, or the denizens of some city ruined by earthquake, the inhabitants of Petrokovka returned to seek a new life amongst the ashes. They could not leave the soil of their childhood to lie fallow. After all, houses can be rebuilt; the earth cannot be destroyed. The orchards were still there—orchards of apple, pear, and cherry. The acacia trees were in bloom when the surviving two hundred souls came back after the Revolution to the site of the village and began a new life.

Kovalenko, the civil war hero, his wife, and twelve-year-old son Mishka, returned with the peasants. They had appointed him an elder although he was still in his middle forties, and despite his wooden leg moved about with astonishing speed.

The community equipped itself with the crudest necessities of living and by 1923 the small village had been rebuilt almost as it had stood before the Revolution. The peasants re-established their claims to the land—some got less, some got more. The kulaks, the richer peasants, had not changed their nature. They lent out money at exorbitant rates of interest, and when a man could not pay they took his land from him plot by plot.

Kovalenko was powerless to intervene. Despite the heavy taxation levied on the kulaks, they were still able to continue in their old ways. Although the Government sent down officials who portioned the land fairly between the families, giving the larger ones a greater portion than the smaller ones, the kulaks still managed to lend out money, to buy grain at better prices than the Government co-operatives.

As yet the peasants still worked their land without machinery, with wooden ploughs that is, and horses. The age of tractors had not yet dawned. But under Kovalenko's enthusiastic leadership a number of the peasants joined together and formed one of the first collective farms in the country, a seed which would one day spread far and wide throughout the Soviet Union.

By this means the collective farmers were able to manage their own economy, sell their produce collectively, grow more, and generally

enrich themselves. But the food problem in Russia at this time presented many difficulties. The demand of the towns was especially great. The industry had only begun its salvage from the wrecks.

Food was needed. The peasants were paid for their grain. But what could they buy for their money? The men of the towns had barely started producing. Consequently, the peasants grumbled.

"Wait, my brothers, wait," Kovalenko would say to them. "We are only beginning. We are not feeding the towns for nothing, you know. Soon they will be weaving shirts for us, making boots, gramophones, all the good things in life. Wait."

The kulaks, who were anxious to fan discontent, appointed as leader the biggest landowner, Nicolas Burenko. His record was suspect. He had fought for the White Guards, it was said. But he claimed that he went to live with his sister in the Samara province, returning to the village only when order was established. No one bothered to investigate his claims. The village of Petrokovka was too small to send an investigator to it, although a Political Instructor was promised.

During the summer of 1924 Peter applied for the post of Political Inspector to Petrokovka. His stay there would coincide with the summer holidays and would serve both a practical and holiday purpose. He carried with him a number of enrolment forms and Party cards. The most worthy, he was told, could be enrolled to the Party.

Actually, he happened to arrive at a most unfortunate moment. When he was a few miles outside of Petrokovka he saw a great brown fog hovering over the village. At first he thought it was a dust storm. But approaching nearer, he discovered that the cloud was composed of locusts. "Poor Petrokovka," he said to himself, "what with the kulaks and the locusts, what will remain of your harvests?"

The whole village had turned out to fight the menace. But they were using the most primitive means. The few hundred peasants armed with wooden clappers and flails were running about trying to exterminate the locusts in bunches by hitting and stamping them into the ground.

Peter saw his father standing on a small mound directing operations with the same confident air as he fought the White Guards. "At them, boys," he would say, pointing to an enormous cluster of the insects, "hit them on the flank! Bring up the artillery." The peasants would pick up enormous clods of earth and try to bury the locusts underneath.

Occasionally, Kovalenko himself would hop along on his game leg and slay a group of insects with a terrific slap of his big hand. More and more came. With a blood-curdling yell he would fall upon them, tear off their wings and their heads, and strew them around. But to no avail. The more the peasants killed, the more locusts there seemed to be.

When Kovalenko saw Peter approaching, riding down the dusty road across the fields to where his father stood, he did not recognize him for a moment. "Go and get help," he yelled. "Ride to the next

village. Ride anywhere. Tell old man Lenin. These locusts are worse than the White Guards. Help us, brother."

Peter jumped out of the saddle, ran up to his father and embraced him. "Hey, Papka, you are in some trouble. But you know, it's no use trying to kill locusts with a shot-gun. Something more desperate is needed."

Kovalenko whooped with joy when he recognized Peter. Slapping him continually on the back, he ran in the crowd of peasants looking for Maruska and Mishka. The two of them, armed with frying-pans, were lambasting the locusts left and right. Maruska kissed her son. At the same time she waved the frying-pan to and fro. "Ah, you beasts, you beasts. There, take that. Bang!"

The locusts would dive to the ground, expiring with a flutter of wings.

"Well, this is a fine home-coming," said Peter. "And I was hoping to find a few Bolsheviks among you." He winked at his father. "Father," he said, "the Party wishes to admit you into its ranks."

"Ho, about time too," Kovalenko growled. "I bet it was Lenin who made you do it."

"Lenin is dead," Peter answered.

"Dead?" the peasants echoed. "Lenin dead. That's why the locusts have come."

"Well," said Peter wryly, "that's as good an explanation as any other. But you must continue Lenin's work. You must proceed scientifically." For a moment he felt rather a self-conscious prig, telling these men of the land how they should go about their business. But the locust danger was severe. For not only were they chewing through the harvests, they were also sowing their eggs in the fields so that next year their progeny would also find food.

"Have you a post office in your village?"

"No," said Kovalenko, "not yet. But there is one ten miles away straight down the road."

"That's too far."

"I know," said the father. "One of the kulaks, Nicholas Burenko—he has a 'phone. A pretty instrument. You talk into one end and somebody answers you at the other. It always works."

"I like the little bell," said Mishka, approaching his elder brother.

"Well, you scamp," said Peter, "it looks as if you will be the hero. Run along to this Burenko and tell him to put through a call to the Agricultural Bureau in Moscow and tell them about the plague. Tell Burenko to ask for their advice and bring his word."

Mishka flew through the cornfields like a lark, leaping and jumping happily at the importance of his mission.

"Have you any oil?" Peter asked his father.

Kovalenko shook his head. "Only kerosene. But we light our lamps with that."

"Bring it out!" said Peter. "All the barrels you have. That may work."

The peasants gathered round him expecting a miracle. "Don't stand there gazing at me," said Peter, "get spades and dig a trench."

"Where?" asked one of the peasants.

"Here, right in the middle of the cornfield."

"But that will destroy some of our crop."

"And what do you think the locusts are doing?" was Peter's rejoinder.

They dug a trench three feet deep and two feet wide and into it was poured the village's precious supply of kerosene, a narrow connecting trench joined the main stream and after the peasants had been placed well away from the wind, Peter set fire to the oil trench.

Enormous black billows of smoke arose, choking the whizzing hordes of locusts in their flight, bringing thousands of them down into the burning kerosene. It looked like success.

But the tenacious insects clambered over the dead or struggling bodies of their relatives and made their way to the opposite bank. "They are good Bolsheviks," said Kovalenko. "Only I wish they knew how hard it is to grow all this grain. Why don't you go and eat the stuff in the kulaks' fields?"

"Why don't they eat buttons and go into the towns?" asked a peasant.

The kerosene trench blazed for a few hours. It was fed continually from the precious reservoir of kerosene. But still no answer came from Burenko. Peter decided to investigate.

He marched down to the house, a larger whitewashed building than any other in the village, and demanded to see Burenko.

Burenko, a man in his early thirties, with fair hair and watery blue eyes, gaped with almost intentional stupidity as Peter spoke to him; on his feet were felt slippers.

"I didn't understand the boy's message," he said. "I asked the operator but she said that the Agricultural Bureau was too far. My telephone line only stretches to Chernigov."

"You idiot," shouted Peter. "Do you realize these people are losing their harvest? Lucky for you the wind doesn't blow your way, otherwise you would not walk about in slippers. Give me the phone."

Burenko shrugged his shoulders and pointed at the instrument. Peter raised the receiver and waited for the operator's voice. But the instrument was dead. It had no current.

Peter felt the line and began following it slowly through the room. At the juncture of the wall he found it had been torn off. "What's this?" he asked sternly.

The man ambled over feigning innocence. "Oh," he said, "I must have tripped over it."

Peter almost lost his control. He flung the instrument down and rushed out of the house. The only thing to do was to ride to the next village and speak to the Agricultural Bureau himself.

Their response was speedy. The next day men arrived in cars with chemical sprayers. The peasants were all assembled and instructed in their work. Each one of them had to serve for three days and would be paid three roubles per day.

As the wind steered so the locusts changed their course, and one

or two peasants seeing that their area was not affected, refused to work. But Kovalenko stood up to them and read them his homily. "All right," he said, "all right. But don't be surprised if I go and put some baby locusts in your fields. Do you know that if I was to put a pair of locusts, a he and a she, into your field, they could in the space of one night produce more than a thousand million babies? Do you understand that?" He had invented the figures. But they worked and achieved the desired end.

Only Burenko refused to help with the work. The worst they could do to him was to fine him three roubles. He gladly paid over and sneered: "The interest will soon be due on my loans."

But Burenko spoke too soon. That afternoon the wind, in a majestic caprice, changed its course and the still unexterminated locusts swung to enjoy Burenko's fat pastures.

The tune Burenko then sang was quite a different one. He ran to the village square, shouting like a madman that the devils had attacked him. But the peasants, who were busy spraying their fields, laughed in his face. "There is a God," they said to him, "and he has punished you, kulak."

'Divine' justice, however, did not prevent the village priest from helping his friend Burenko. But the two of them, together with their numerous children, were powerless against the locusts. Peter took charge. "Father," he said, "the peasants are wrong. They must help Burenko."

"Help him? The devil take him. Let him find his own help. When we needed it what did he do? He ate cakes. Well, we'll eat the cakes now."

"But you are a Bolshevik," Peter pleaded, "you must look at these things objectively, fairly. We can't waste Burenko's grain. There are people who need it. By punishing him, we'll only punish others who are innocent."

"Hm," Kovalenko grumbled, "there is something in that." And then he said, the idea striking him forcibly. "If those locusts lay their babies on his fields, they will be ready to start hopping next summer. And then, perhaps, they will take a fancy to our pastures. You are right, Pyotr."

Peter and Kovalenko led the peasants to the kulak's fields. The kulak was astonished to see them take out their sprays and methodically cover his acres with chemicals. "God bless you, my neighbours," Burenko said piously, and the priest raised his hand in the sign of benediction. "God will reward you."

"Not only God will reward us," said Kovalenko, "but you will reward us, you fat pumpkin. Speak, Pyotr."

"We will save your grain," Peter said with equanimity, "on one condition, and that is that you sell it to the Government at a fair price and make no deal with the Nep profiteers."

Burenko was taken aback. "I can't agree. Why should I sell my grain to the Government?"

"Well," said Kovalenko, raising his hands, "all right then."

The peasants turned off their sprays. "You had rather have the grain in the locusts' belly? Take the Government's price, man. Be wise. In two years the collective farm will produce ten times more than you do. You will be pleased to get a good rouble for your food."

For many months the peasants spoke of Burenko's reformation and praised the sagacity of the young political instructor. "Of course," said Kovalenko, "it was I who really scared him with the story of the locusts' babies."

THIRTEEN

THAT same evening when they were sitting down to dinner eating *bortsch*, sour cream and pickled cucumbers, Kovalenko informed his son thus: "Do you know a couple of *verst*s from here there is a big farm. Foreigners run it. They have enormous machines like cars that can do the work of twenty men in a day. They don't use the sickle. They cut wheat with windmills that walk across the ground, pull out the wheat and then put it into a box. Then some skilful man ties them into little bundles and throws them out again, ready stacked."

Peter laughed. "There is no little man tying it into bundles, Father. It's all done by machinery. Tractors, combination reapers, and threshers. You will soon have them. It's an American experimental station. The Government has asked these foreign experts to teach you peasants how to make the best of your land."

"The priest," said his mother, "says these machines are unholy and that the bread will taste of iron and oil."

"The priest," said little Mishka shrewdly, "is a friend of Burenko, the kulak."

"Yes," said Peter, "that about explains it. I propose we take a party of peasants with us to-morrow and visit the farm. What do you say?" Kovalenko agreed. He sent Mishka out to pass on the invitation to his best friends.

Next morning early the peasants moved off to visit the foreigners' farm, as they called the experimental station. When they were barely half a mile off they could hear the clanging of machinery, the work in the repair smithies, and their eyes dilated with fear. "The priest says it's the devil's work. He says it's cruel to tear the earth up with iron. That's why God gave the Russian man a wooden plough."

Peter waved them on. They all looked to Kovalenko. The old man, refusing to show any fear although secretly he wondered what the noise was all about, advanced.

The nearer they approached the louder grew the clatter. Peter had intentionally told the peasants to bring their useless implements. One man stood with two broken pieces of a scythe. Another with a bent spade.

In order to impress them, Peter told them to hand the instruments into the smithy and wait outside. Whilst they were being shown over

the tractors and twenty-two blade ploughs, the men in the smithy were mending their implements. When the scythe was returned to the peasant, he exclaimed: "This cannot be mine. It's new. How did you join the two pieces together? It's a miracle."

The other peasants laughed at him, not because they understood, but because they recognized the wooden handle. "It's yours, Ivan, look at the handle," they told him.

"Yes, the handle is mine."

Similarly the spade was righted. A hoe was repaired. The peasants, at the end of half an hour, discovered how these miracles were done. "It's simple," they said; "we could do it ourselves."

Many of them were given an opportunity to carry out their words. The Americans were astonished at the speed with which these men learned the most complicated tasks.

FOURTEEN

BESIDES the small wooden village church at Petrokovka there were a number of chapels or barns where the various sects used to worship God in their own particular way. The church had openly sided with the Tsar and later the White Guard reaction, and it therefore suffered like any other political institution.

The godlessness of the towns took many years to penetrate into the villages. It was never successful in its entirety. The best it did was to purify the rotten edifice, to deprive the peasant of superstition and fetish and, whilst leaving him his God, give him a highly critical view of those who had been appointed His ministers.

A few of the village popes, very few, moved with the times. The various religious sects—which endured persecution and in old days were subjected to heresy hunts which meant torture and burning, no less vicious than the Grand Inquisition—became more or less the Nepmen of religion. In the transitional period when illiteracy was still unconquered, these sects tried to entrench themselves and because of their millennial teaching and pseudo-Communist beliefs, many of the peasants were caught in the snare.

In the village of Petrokovka itself, amongst four hundred people that is, there were at least six different sects. Besides these there was the old Orthodox Church, and late in 1924 came a different variant of the same faith, calling itself the New Orthodox Church. This last refinement supported the Government and made its own Concordat.

The prosecution of the old clerics and their drugging influence had already begun. But the rumour of these things came slowly to Petrokovka. The six religious sects there were these: the Molokany (the milk drinkers); the Khlysty (the flagelators); the Skroptsy (the Castrated); a few Medaillists, a small congregation of Jehovahists, and a few fire baptists.

All these sects had one thing in common: they opposed the

organized religion and believed that each held in their ritual the only communion with God that was possible. They also diverged from the Orthodox in their belief of a kingdom of God upon earth and awaited a millenium. Most of them had a few superficial resemblances to primitive Communism, shared their goods with one another and taught brotherly love. Their fanaticism drove them to extraordinary spiritual and physical excesses. They numbered amongst their followers not only the rude peasantry but aristocrats, officers, clerks, and business-men. In the village of Petrokovka the adherents of these sects were, of course, peasants.

It happened that one night when Peter was staying on his father's small farm he saw his mother go out late when the rest of them were supposed to be asleep. He followed her quietly into the yard and watched her cross over to the neighbour's garden. She tapped gently on the door and another peasant appeared. Peter followed them from bush to bush, unable to understand the purpose of this nightly gathering.

Soon some twenty or thirty men and women were gathered together. In the silence of the night they trod carefully not to awaken the others and made their way to the collective barn. Peter, his curiosity prompting him even further, followed them. The door to the barn was carefully bolted, so he had no option but to climb up on to the roof. There he sat amongst the hay and watched the procedure.

In the centre of the barn stood a large tub of water. This symbol alone was enough to tell Peter that he was witnessing a meeting of the Khlysty. The tub represented the river Jordan.

Peter saw his mother take a prominent position on a raised dais. A man sat down next to her and held her hand. Then all those present—men and women—began to strip themselves to the skin. They threw their clothes into a large bundle and began prancing up to the tub, holding large green branches. Then they started singing, and rhythmically beating the surface of the water.

As the singing increased, they turned the green branches on to each other's backs and scourged each other unmercifully. Their ecstasy was almost African.

Faster and faster they whipped each other until enormous weals appeared on their backs and fine strips of blood. Some of the twigs were turning red, but still they went on whipping. Then, one by one, they would reel with exhaustion and ecstasy and, throwing away the twigs, embraced each other publicly, so that men and women merged into one mass.

During the whole of this performance, Maruska and her partner sat without moving. When the orgy was at its height they, too, undressed and lay down on the floor.

Peter turned away his head and went back to his hut.

He did not know whether he should tell his father. What good would it do? These sects were born out of some primitive urge for licence. Peter had read about the Roman Saturnalias. More than that, he knew that early in the Revolution there were similar excesses.

The sudden freedom, the lack of restriction, the anarchy, all these produced outbursts of irregular behaviour, no different to the one he had witnessed, the gathering of the Khlysty. "Through education, development, sublimation, men will learn not to abuse their freedom," said Peter. "And how are these peasants to learn? On one side the rigid Orthodox church, on the other extreme the fantastic sects." He began to understand why the Government was supporting the new Rational Church. It was a bridge.

When, on the next day, the new Reform Church priest arrived, Peter sought him out and had a conversation with him. The new priest was about thirty years old, clean-shaven, with an honest, intelligent air about him. He did not affect the extreme piety and long beard of the Old Church.

"The difference between us," he said, when he welcomed Peter and offered him tea, "is largely political. The leaders of the old Greek Church are mystical, deeply speculative and are completely out of touch with modern conditions. Many of their leaders immured themselves for years in remote parts of Russia. Here they were able to read and meditate, not so much on the practical condition of the people as on theological mysteries of our faith.

"In 1917, the Old Church, as you know, deliberately opposed the new Government. And the answer of many Communists was that it should be destroyed. Now our Reformed Church grew largely out of a need for action. We feel that although the old dogmas and religious observance must be maintained, a definite attempt should be made to abolish the deep and meaningless superstition of our people."

"In other words," said Peter, "you want less emphasis on formalities."

"Yes," the priest agreed. "And at the same time we want them to see that the new economic and social changes are designed for their benefit. Of course, we are only a minority church. We represent a bare thirty-two per cent. We did our best to develop our theories within a unified church; but circumstances brought about a break."

"Very interesting," said Peter; "but, tell me, did you receive any encouragement on the part of the Government?"

"If you mean encouragement in the sense of political action, then the answer is no. But we believe that it took an interest in us and realized that our work was not designed to create an opiate for the people but rather to make it conscious of the Government's new social responsibilities."

"I believe," said Peter, "you were excommunicated by the Old Church."

"That is so," answered the priest. "Not only was the Old Church irritated by our support of the Government, but it objected to the reform that we instituted, namely, marriage amongst the priesthood, or, rather, we believe that a married priest should be able to attain the highest dignities of office. In the Old Church, these were reserved only for monks."

"Tell me," said Peter, "and this is the acid test, what part did you play in the famine?"

"Our efforts were principally concerned in collecting money and treasure and giving it for relief purposes. The Old Church refused to do so unless it was allowed to distribute the bounties itself. We considered that distribution was a social organization and therefore outside the province of the Church. You see, we see the Spirit of God in the necessary social changes which the Government is bringing about. So long as these changes oppose evil and aid good we are behind them. We feel that certain social improvements can spring from the will of the people. They can even go to the extent of involving social revolution. After all, there are plenty of incidents in the Bible where the prophets of old lead the people in revolt against their tyrants."

"Tell me, what are your reactions to secular education then?" Peter interrupted.

"The intellectual growth or development of the individual must, I would say, be voluntary. It must not be forced. Providing the State, therefore, looks after the education of people, and that education is directed towards the social welfare of the masses, we consider this work pleasing in the sight of God. I know what you want to say. You want to suggest that modern science is in conflict with religion. But we disagree with you. Yes, we disagree with you." He underlined the sentence. "Our object is to create in Russia a well-trained and cultured people having a proper sense of spiritual values. Surely neither God nor a Soviet Government can find fault in that."

When Peter said good-bye to the young priest he was more certain than ever that Russia had entered the period of great reformation. It had come to Europe, to England for example, three hundred years previously. Although he himself was an atheist, he could see no reason why people should not be free to practise their religious inclinations providing these did not conflict with the development of society and its hard struggle to achieve a better material life.

FIFTEEN

THE Nep period brought immense disillusionment into those active revolutionaries who had prophesied that Russia would become socialist overnight. It was Trotsky who explained that unless there was a world revolution, socialism in Russia was doomed. The *festina lente* policy of Lenin, and subsequently of Stalin, had no appeal to these fiery warriors of war and revolution.

Their major complaint was that Russia should devote all her energies towards industrialization even if it meant crushing the peasant, impoverishing him still further. The peasant was an individualist; selfish, greedy, caring only about his plot of land.

As the years passed and prospects of a world revolution grew more and more remote, so Trotsky and his followers began to conduct a whispering campaign against the Government. Against him stood

Stalin. His thesis was that the peasant was the mainstay of Russia and that even the kulak should be tolerated for a while so as to increase production. Russia was not yet ready for full mobilization. The wounds of the Revolution had yet to be healed.

In the artistic circles in which Boris Mishkin moved the Trotskyist faction had the upper hand. These restless people were eternally revolutionizing, eternally making war on something. Since they could not make a world revolution, they proceeded to create a revolution in art.

Boris had arrived in the city of his birth embittered, pessimistic, and without money. Periodically he would write to Olga at the Prophylactorium, giving what news he had, rebelling against misfortune and her brother.

But Olga counselled patience. She loved him still, she wrote. "And the first year," she said, "has gone so quickly. There are only two more years to go."

She gave many details of her personal and communal life. She even announced that she had been able to develop her interests in medicine and at the end of her term of correction she planned to go to the University of Medicine.

At the moment Boris was interested in cubo-futurism. He spoke a great deal of nonsense about the dynamics of revolutionary destruction which derived directly from the cosmic. At this period it was fashionable to play at heroics, and Boris was particularly attracted by what is known as the monumental style.

"I consider," he would harangue a group of students that gathered in his rooms after the day's work in the studio, "that we have entered the period of abstract deformation. I propose that the Alexander column in front of the Winter Palace shall be made to fit the new concepts of art."

The next day he and his companions moved to the Winter Palace, carrying enormous wooden parallelograms, canvas, bright pots of paint, and proceeded to 'deform' the monument. Fantastic cubes were placed on Alexander's head. His body was converted into a parallelogram. Well satisfied with their work the students departed.

A week later, Boris decided that revolutionary destruction did not stop at cubo-futurism. "There are bourgeois remnants even in this artistic expression," he explained. "Let us go further. After all, true art should abolish all bourgeois artistic materials and elements. What do we want with colours, with pencils, charcoal? Why should we go on using lines and plains? We are populists. We must employ counter-relief."

Nobody knew quite what he meant. He explained further. "Let us use only those things which the people handle in their daily lives!"

The students began to draw up a list of new materials which were to embellish this new revolutionary art. "I suggest we make good use of paper and glass, and box lids!"

"Hear, hear," said a student called Perchavin. He was Boris's most faithful follower, the artisan as it were, of Boris's ideas.

Gubsky, another student, whose artistic merits were probably higher than Boris's, nevertheless enjoyed these intellectual orgies. He suggested that the new art should be composed of hair, electric lamps, nails, and screws.

"And gas piping," said Boris solemnly.

"And how are we to combine it, Comrade Mishkin?" Gubsky asked curiously, not without a trace of irony. "How are we to mould it together?"

"Glue, and perhaps the acetylene lamp!"

Of course, the period, despite its many fancies was not unproductive of good art. There were painters of the stature of Iunii Anenkov who worked within futurist principles but created a synthesis of other artistic modes. Boris, who in two weeks graduated from counter-relief to an objectless expressionist, pronounced Anenkov a good painter but a hopeless bourgeois.

The Russians became fascinated by machines. Boris, who had graduated to architecture, was proposing to create a building in the shape of a cylinder which would turn round on its axis once a day. "It can serve as a clock," said Boris, "as well. Indeed, it can follow the sun."

Some thought that this movable house of Boris was destined to create a completely new form.

But Boris went one better. He proposed to build three cylindrical houses, one on top of each other, communicated by lifts. All these houses would be in perpetual motion. "Perpetual revolution," Boris explained, "is the aim of humanity."

Boris had quite unconsciously drifted towards Trotskyism although he had no time for any particular political dialectics. The Revolution was an opportunity to express himself. That was what Boris wanted to do most.

"Stone and wood are dead," was one of Boris's pronouncements, cribbed, no doubt, from one of the more eminent architects. "Stone cannot keep pace with the tempo of our life. The day is not distant when instead of driving about in cars and on trams, the pavements on our streets will roll!"

In such a delicious miasma of artistic fatuity Boris Mishkin wallowed for more than two years.

SIXTEEN

THE three gallants, Boris, Perchavin, and Gubsky, found employment in one of the enormous Government art studios in Moscow which turned out cartoons and posters, propagandizing anything from a tractor to how to clean your teeth. "This is useful work," Boris would say whenever he drew his monthly wage. "If Rembrandt was alive to-day, consider what a masterpiece he could create out of a tractor. How he would linger over a peasant's brawny hands."

"Or a Van Gogh," Perchavin would squeak, putting his fingers through his curly hair.

The three friends had passed through their extremist days. They were, to use their own words, 'finding their souls'. The three of them were superb draughtsmen, and had an excellent sense of comedy which wasn't always either acceptable to the Government or very amusing to the peasants. Nevertheless, their composite pictures, drawn and captioned by themselves, had attracted attention. One might almost say that they were fashionable.

Boris still hankered after the cube whilst his friend Gubsky utilized a much more flowing line. Perchavin generally filled in details and thought of the caption. The result of a cube cow on a sweeping terrain was startling. The colours they employed were of the brightest. Their cows talked. Perchavin knew how to make them talk, for periodically he would take his easel into the collective farms around Moscow and would discuss the problems of cleanliness and technique, and then would return to his friends and pour out enthusiastically his ideas for a future poster on revolutionary milking.

Happily, these three artists were subordinated to a very sane and practical Director of Artistic Propaganda, and he managed to temper their exuberance and at the same time gave them a free hand in the expression which they chose. They also drew many fascinating subjects during their spare time and, occasionally, one of their paintings would be exhibited.

Boris's work grew more architectural every year, so much so that he decided to become an architect. Only, of course, he had forgotten all about his dream houses revolving on ball-bearings and having moving pavements outside. But he still had a long way to go before he could plan a really practical building.

They had little time to interest themselves in the various political turns which the year 1926 brought about. Perchavin and Gubsky were open admirers of Comrade Trotsky. Every day they lisped about the world revolution, said that only when all the world was communistic could there be any real art. Boris would argue against this nonsense, but he thought his friends harmless, as indeed they were.

Now and again they would go to meetings of Trotskyist sympathizers and return laden with leaflets, which they were to distribute secretly as in the old days when their activities were turned against the Tsarist Government. "Stick to your paint-pots!" Boris would warn them. "Trotsky is a finished number. He has played his last tune. Mark my words!"

Not long afterwards Trotsky was exiled, and indeed it looked as if his game was up.

"Russia is going back to anti-Semitism, that's what it is," swore Perchavin. "Trotsky is a Jew. That's why they don't like him."

"Rubbish," Boris replied; "the Revolution is stabilizing itself. It is reacting against the idealistic and missionary temperament of Trotsky. We are going back to our folk ways, aiming to achieve national self-sufficiency. Our job is as Stalin says, to make the world see that Socialism is possible in one land."

But the year 1926 had a far more immediate importance to Boris. One day—it was spring—he received a letter from Olga telling him to come and collect her on the following Saturday morning. Two and a half years of her 'sentence' to the Curative Prophylactorium were over. She had already passed her intermediate medical examination.

Although during those two and a half years she had received no visitors, largely because she herself did not want to see anyone, she had corresponded frequently with Boris. They were having what Boris described as a 'paper affair', and although many temptations, such as beautiful models, pretty peasant girls, and not a few quite intelligent women had come Boris's way, he had never been able to free himself from Olga's face and the promise which he had made to himself; not that the years had not dragged dreadfully, but he had killed them in hard work, knowing the rebellion was futile. This was, perhaps, largely due to Olga's letters, which were sensible and compassionate at the same time. She never allowed a trace of self-pity to enter into them. Boris had kept every letter. He would publish them one day, he told himself.

He wondered sometimes why he had not told his bosom friends about Olga. But he had to admit his pride, his fear of hurting his love. "Prejudices," he would repeat. "But what can you do? I am not an emancipated man."

Olga wrote to him frequently, telling him to be quite honest. "I am not ashamed," she said, "why should you be?" But still Boris did not so much as breathe her name to his friends.

They were mystified by the frequent letters and having inquired once or twice and been refused a simple answer, they refrained. "An old mistress that bores him!" was their final conclusion.

Gubsky who was the soul of curiosity, witty and sophisticated, once went through Boris's enormous letter-case. But he found the letters tied so tightly with string and sealed with red sealing-wax that to have opened them would have meant a breach of confidence. He tried turning up the tips, but read very little. A few innocuous words. He smelt the paper for powder. Now and then, balancing the packet in his hand, he was tempted to tell Perchavin that he had read the letters. Indeed, one day he invented a completely false story to the effect that Boris was keeping some ex-princess in hiding. "A beautiful girl whom he was converting to Communism. Hence the reason for the fat correspondence and the frequent letters."

But Perchavin had quite a different theory. "It's probably a mad sister, you know. He naturally wants to keep it quiet."

Boris's only reply to a direct question was that it was his business, exclusively his. And when his friends made fantastic suggestions, he grew a little annoyed with them. If he had not mumbled Olga's name in his sleep one night within their hearing, they would never have known her name.

"Is she a Party member?" Gubsky asked. "I bet she is the wife of one of the members of the Central Committee. That's why you

are so secretive. Come out with it into the open. After all, you can trust us with an *affaire* of the heart."

SEVENTEEN

EARLY one Saturday morning, it must have been seven or eight, Boris appeared at the Prophylactorium. He knew the building well, for he had frequently visited it in the hope of seeing Olga. "At least," he would say to himself, "I will go and breathe near her."

The house was a very ordinary one, composed of five storeys. It had obviously belonged to some rich merchant. The gates were of iron and well moulded. But the most striking feature about it was the beautiful, well-kept garden. This was not visible from the street. But Boris had once, in a fit of frenzy, clambered on top of the wall, from which he was pulled down by a militia man and hauled before a minor court.

This was not his last offence. From then onwards, every month he had carefully allotted a portion of his income up to about twenty roubles to his 'fine' as he called it. This wall-clambering had become a regular habit. For by sitting on the wall, though it be but for a few minutes, he was able to see the women working in the garden. The distance, however, was too great for him to discern any face; although on every occasion he swore to himself he had seen Olga. "Just her walk!" he would say.

These self-delusions cost him his regular twenty roubles. The judges or magistrates composed of two men and a woman, had questioned him earnestly on the reason. But he gave no satisfactory answer. Once a doctor had been called in to report on the state of his mind. "The patient has a fondness for walls," the doctor said wryly, "otherwise he is quite sane. I've seen some of his paintings to prejudice myself. But I declare him quite sane."

"Why don't you use the gate?" one of the judges had asked him. "You have only to walk in if you want to see anybody. What's her name? Perhaps we can arrange a meeting for you." But Boris was obdurate. He revealed nothing.

On this happy Saturday morning, however, he had no need to clamber on the wall although, it is true, some reflex in his body stirred as he approached the building. The militiaman was just passing on his round though—and there would be little point in losing twenty roubles on this, the happiest moment of his life. Instead, he obeyed another impulse, and fled past the militia man who had recognized his old friend the 'Wall-Squatter', and gave a shout, thinking that Boris was going to throw himself under a passing car.

But Boris nimbly negotiated the traffic, jumping over a small peasant's cart in the process and then running like a madman towards a flower-stall. He bought twenty roubles' worth of flowers. "I can afford it now," he said to himself, as he marched proudly back.

Then, swinging the heavy iron door back with his foot, he walked up to the door and rang the bell.

He was greeted by a fat, kindly woman dressed in white. She looked like a nurse. When she saw Boris she smiled. "You have come to fetch Olga Kovalenko," she said. "Comrade, come in. She is waiting for you."

Boris entered into the clean long hall and looked round. Here and there he noticed big vases of spring flowers, Crimean flowers. "This is a happy place," he informed the attendant. "I like it. I thought you had bars here, and electrical burglar alarms. This looks like a first-class hotel."

"We are not a prison," the attendant answered; "nor are our employers"—that is how she referred to the inmates of the place—"prisoners. They have a contract with us to stay for so many years and to learn a trade. Well, your Olga is on her way to becoming a fine doctor. We all go to her for our colds, even now. A few of the women have children. We keep them here. They love Olga's medicines, for she takes the trouble to make them sweet and pleasant." Chattering breezily, the attendant showed Boris to the next floor. Then, opening a door for him, she discreetly disappeared.

Olga was standing in the middle of the room in a white spring dress. She had a bright pale lemon beret on her head, and was carrying a suit-case. Boris gave a yell of delight and ran forward to meet her. They embraced through the flowers for some minutes, and then he began to feel her face all over. "You are the same," he yelled. "The same. But you are looking better," he corrected, "fatter."

He sniffed her closely. "Antiseptics. Never mind. I'll get used to it."

Olga did not speak for a few moments. Her eyes were diffused with tears. "Hallo," she said quietly, unemotionally.

Boris was taken aback. "You don't love me," he stammered. "I know you don't."

Olga's face lit up suddenly. "It's a plot," she said, "my darling, I have been thinking it out for many months."

"What plot? What is this? You are in love with someone else. But how can you be? Men aren't allowed in here. Don't say you have fallen in love with a woman."

"Now, now," Olga quietened him. "Really, life isn't just a matter of love. I wanted to see how you feel. After all, two and a half years is a long time. And paper letters are at the best but a weak chain."

"Chains!" Boris exclaimed. "Do you think I need chains? I have sat on the wall of this wretched place once a month. It cost me more than"—he calculated speedily—"five hundred roubles for the pleasure, and you talk to me of paper chains. I love you, carbolic lozenge, love you, love you!" He kissed her frantically on the mouth.

Then Olga pulled off her beret and shook her hair. She burst into peals of laughter. "Well, then, it's all right, isn't it?"

"Let's get out," said Boris, "let's celebrate. I have two friends. They are perfectly mad. But you will love them. That's a warning.

Of course, I am not going to let you see them the first day," he babbled on and on.

"Of course you have told them about me," Olga asked.

"Well, yes, sort of," Boris stammered. "That is, they have seen your letters."

"What, you are as close friends as that? Oh, Boris, if I knew that you were reading my letters out loud to them I would have written very differently."

"Oh no, not aloud. They haven't seen them. They just saw the envelopes."

"Well, that's all right then. I won't need an introduction."

"The fact is . . ." Boris began.

"The fact is," Olga repeated after him, looking straight into his eyes, "that you are a hell of a petty bourgeois. And that you are secretly ashamed of all this. Well, our Soviet Society . . ."

"Good heavens, Olga. You don't mean to say you are a Communist?"

"Of course. You know, I haven't wasted my two and a half years. I have seen more and heard more than I would have done if I had been free. You know, it's like a school. One has one's food and no worries, one learns and studies. It's like looking out of a window on life. You are watching it go past you. I have read all the papers, followed all the speeches."

"Then you are more intelligent than I am, Olga." They laughed together.

"I must confess," Boris admitted, "that I had no idea it was as clean and pleasant as it is. I imagined that it was a prison where you are all taught to be thoroughly ashamed of yourselves. You know, I've read all about these institutions. The wife, for example, of the Emperor Justinian, founded a home on the Bosphorous for five hundred women. And you know what sort of a home it was? More than half of the women preferred to jump into the sea to escape."

"But this is a Soviet institution. Nobody wants to escape here. Why, more than seventeen per cent of the girls aren't prostitutes at all. They are homeless, unemployed, or merely ill. As a matter of fact, everyone who has entered here has come voluntarily."

"Oh, how do you make that out?" said Boris. "They dragged you away. You were sentenced to this place."

"Nonsense," said Olga. "I let you imagine that. But the truth is that I knew this was the only way of escaping the past and of finding a future for me and for you."

"But they took you away in a van. That fine brother of yours had you arrested."

"That's what I thought. But the truth is that I had applied to come here some days before I met you. Peter discovered this and as there was a place vacant, he hurried my application. That's all."

"But Olga," said Boris, not understanding, "why did you want to marry me? What was the point of that?"

"Why not?" said Olga. "I was going to tell you that I would be

away for some time. But you loved me, didn't you? It would have come to the same, wouldn't it?"

"Well, yes," Boris admitted; "that's true. You are a curious girl." They walked out hand in hand.

"How does this place run?" he asked her. "Who pays to support these girls?"

"The State. Hallo, Manya." Olga waved her hand to the girl that passed her and had wished her good day. Then, turning to Boris, she continued the conversation. "This isn't a charity institute, you know. We accept no funds from private sources. Doctors, service, all the care, attention to the patients as well as the medicine, are given without any cost. You see, you did not know but I haven't always been in this building. I've been studying at the School of Medicine. The first few months my strength was built up. This place is really like a sanatorium where the women are rehabilitated, cured of their illnesses and so on. Later they go to some affiliated Prophylactorium in another locality. There they find factories and shops, clinics and elementary schools, living quarters and a meeting hall."

"And to think," said Boris, "that I have been sitting on the wall of this building even whilst you have been away."

"Poor darling. There were many times I wanted to meet you. I've been going to medical classes quite regularly. It would have been easy to have seen you for an hour or two. But I wanted nothing to distract me. I was afraid that I might want to run away with you and that would spoil everything. But now I am well on my way to being a doctor."

"But tell me more about the other places."

"Well, I've seen a factory outside Moscow where these girls are taught to work. They go through a school, of course, at first. But after a short while they get very handy and can earn, as a matter of fact do earn, about two hundred and fifty roubles a month."

"That's a very good wage. Let me see . . . for that I could have sat twelve and a half times on your wall."

"But you didn't have to pay for it, did you?" Olga asked in surprise.

"In fines," he explained to her.

Olga showed him the comfortable drawing-room, simply furnished with plenty of books, a wireless, and a rather old and dilapidated gramophone.

"I say, what's this?" Boris pointed his finger at a three feet square cartoon showing a man and a woman worker advancing together with arms outstretched, entitled 'For equal work, equal pay'.

"That's nothing to get excited about!" said Olga. "We change these posters once a week. That's a fine one, isn't it?"

"I should think it is," he exclaimed, "considering I did it."

"You did it?"

"Well, not alone. I did the man and the woman and Gubsky and Perchavin filled in the background. See, these are my cubes. I can tell them from a mile off. I did it about a month ago."

"Well, it may not be art," said Olga. "But it's good strong stuff and that's what we need here. After all, it's no good living in a small world of artists. You want to bring your art to the people, don't you? By giving them good posters, you can teach them to appreciate good art."

"Well, you certainly believe in equal pay for equal work. Two hundred and fifty roubles a month is fair money. Have you been earning that much?"

"What, are you waiting for a dowry?" Olga laughed. "The State is my dowry. My prospects as a doctor, my health."

"No, no," Boris attested; "but I thought perhaps you had a little money saved up."

"Whatever for?"

"For a honeymoon. For a rest; we can go away somewhere. . . ."

"Well, you know," Olga told him, "all I've had were my pocket expenses. The women who earned the two hundred and fifty roubles pay out about a hundred to cover their food, their house-cleaning, bed linen, towels, all that sort of thing."

"Well, that's a pity," said Boris, "that's a great pity. But perhaps I shall be able to borrow some money from Gubsky and Perchavin."

"But that wouldn't be nice. Your Perchavin needs his money."

"No, he doesn't. By borrowing it from him I save him from drink. I do him a good turn. Then when he wants a suit or a pair of shoes, I pawn mine with an old Jew."

Olga took Boris from one room to the other. She introduced him to many of the doctors and nurses as well as the patients. Boris was astonished by the atmosphere of happiness and contentedness which reigned in the place. "The world is changing," he said to Olga.

"It certainly is," she replied. "Do you know that we have already sent out more than two thousand five hundred women into the Great Stalin Auto-plant, the Kaganovich Ball-bearing Plant, the Kuibishev Elector Combinat. Many of our old girls are already doctors, some are even air pilots. Plenty are singers and actresses and musicians. And there is one thing I must tell you: once a woman begins working in the Prophylactorium, she is never referred to as a prostitute. Her past is finished. She is a worker and proud of it."

They stepped out of the whitewashed walls. They went through the garden, picking and smelling flowers. When it was time for Olga to go, a large crowd saw her off and presented her with a gift—rather, two gifts. One was a stethoscope and the other was a little peasant cradle. "They always," said Olga, "give a girl that leaves the place, a cradle."

EIGHTEEN

BEFORE Boris had set out to fetch Olga from the Prophylactorium, he had gone to the post office to send a brief telegram to Comrades Gubsky and Perchavin, informing them that as he was entering into

marriage with a certain Olga Kovalenko, would they kindly make the studio look less like a stable, remove the cooking smells, put a coat of paint on the door and scrounge some clean linen.

But when Boris and Olga appeared at the flat some two hours later, after their marriage at the Register Office, they were welcomed by the most astonishing signs of activity. Boris gasped. "The lunatics have taken me literally."

The whole studio had evidently been cleaned out, swept and washed, and where the wallpaper had previously shown hungry rents, enormous posters had been pinned up with drawing-pins. The atmosphere in the room was electric. It was festooned with flowers. Even the floor had been sprinkled with eau-de-Cologne, and a small square table stood in the middle of the room with a clean tablecloth such as had never been seen in the establishment before. And on the table stood Malossoi caviar, champagne, Crimean fruits, grapes, and an impudent little bowl of violets and daisies.

The two friends sprang to attention at the door-post like grenadiers. "A beautiful woman!" said Perchavin to Gubsky.

"A Juno!" the other replied.

They each seized Olga by the hand and covered it with kisses, a piece of old-fashioned gallantry which she did not appreciate immediately. "Introduce us! Introduce us!" they cried.

Boris, overwhelmed by the welcome, weakly pointed to Olga and said: "My wife, comrades Perchavin and Gubsky." And then, in an off-stage whisper he asked sternly: "Where did you steal this repast and the clean cloth?"

"We hired it from a restaurant," said Gubsky.

"But the fruit is real," said Perchavin. "We bought it in the market."

Olga, while she was making the acquaintance of Boris's two friends, was casting a feminine eye over the *décor* and the furniture. The problem, however, that tormented her most was that all four of them would have to sleep in one room. Moscow was still very overcrowded.

"We'll be one happy family," Gubsky assured Olga, taking her to the table and brushing imaginary dust off a wooden chair. "Please sit down."

"We shall live discreetly in one corner," said Perchavin, "we will put up a wall of asbestos and a little door."

"You will be quite alone," Gubsky assured her.

They sat down to the table and opened a magnum of Crimean champagne. "To the lady whose mysterious letters have kept us on edge for the last two years!" Perchavin toasted Olga.

"We do not inquire into your social origin, princess," said Gubsky. "You are a beautiful woman and you have served the Revolution by marrying one of its foremost artists."

"You see," said Boris, "they want to know all about you."

"Why not?" said Olga. She had noticed the strain in his voice. "You should have told everything to our room-mates, Boris dear.

The fact is, comrades, I am a student doctor. I have spent two years in the Prophylactorium where I went voluntarily."

Boris pulled his eyes down uncomfortably and waited for his friends to speak.

"An excellent speech!" said Gubsky. "Are there any more women like you in the Prophylactorium, comrade?"

"Plenty," Olga replied laughingly.

"Well, let us drink to your long life and happiness."

"To our Soviet institutions!" said Olga, almost pointedly.

"To female emancipation!" Perchavin put in. "To a new life." They clinked glasses and drank down the champagne.

Perchavin put his hand in his pocket and took out a grubby envelope. "Let me present you, Comrade Mishkin," he said solemnly, "with a little gift—a collective gift, I may say, from your studio colleagues." He handed the envelope over to the astonished Boris who, for a moment, did not know what to do with it.

"Open it!" Gubsky coaxed, "don't worry. It isn't a propaganda leaflet."

Boris pulled the envelope almost apart and as he did so money scattered on the floor.

"Don't treat it like that!" said Gubsky. "Two thousand roubles are worth considering. We have applied for and obtained permission for you to be away for a week. In bourgeois lands they call it a honeymoon. Let us call it a well-deserved holiday. Where will you go? To the Caucasus? Or perhaps to Yalta?"

Boris stammered his thanks and looked appealingly at Olga. She impulsively rose from the table and, putting her arms round the two men, gave them each a hurried kiss.

NINETEEN

THEY decided to go to Yasnaya Polyana, a small village but five hours' travelling away from Moscow. A week was too short to go down to the Crimea or the Caucasus. They promised themselves a mountain holiday when the summer came.

Now they were standing on the deserted platform of the small country station, watching the little flag on the last car of the departing train disappearing behind the bend. "My, isn't the silence startling!"

Boris turned to Olga and squeezed her hand. "Don't worry," he said, "you won't find it so lonely. Only last year thirty-six thousand people came to Yasnaya Polyana to learn at first hand about the life and the work of the man who gave the world *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Resurrection*."

"Isn't it wonderful to think that we shall actually live in the same house as he did?" Olga said. They carried their suit-cases happily to the estate.

Just as a century ago two small white towers stood guard at the entrance of the Tolstoy estate. Here was the little world which was

being safeguarded from the ravages of time. They were introduced to the staff of eight research workers, who had under them some two or three dozen assistants. They walked along the shady pathway that led to the writer's house. "Now I know," said Olga, "where Tolstoy got his description of the lovely walk he describes in *War and Peace*. Don't you feel that any moment Prince Bolkonsky would step out from behind one of the trees?"

Boris nodded happily.

"And look at that pond glistening in the sunlight over there on the left! Tolstoy used to fish for carp in it, and they say that he was always very happy because he was never able to catch one."

They walked in amongst the blossoming apple trees and breathed deeply pure spring air.

"How sweet the apples must taste from these trees!" said Olga. She very gingerly bent a bough and sniffed the blossom.

Boris wiped the yellow pollen off her nose. "You look like a bee," he laughed.

In the middle of the estate stood the old building erected towards the end of the eighteenth century by Prince Bolkonsky, courtier of the Empress Catherine.

Boris and Olga were put up for the night in the servants' quarters. The wing of the serf-dwelling had been remodelled into a comfortable little hotel. There were only two other visitors, another honeymoon couple, so they were told. Their name was Urasov. But it appeared that they were a studious couple and spent most of the morning in the library.

Urasov himself was a workman in the Stalin Auto Works. But in his spare time he made a study of nineteenth-century literature and was well-known at Yasnaya Polyana. He had just married a girl who had only one arm. The other was lost in the civil war.

Boris and Olga listened to these details without any particular interest. They were given by a talkative attendant who wanted to guide them and show them over the place. They were secretly a little bored with him. "Here is a venerable elm," he said, pointing to an enormous tree which spread its branches out over a round bench at the entrance of the house. "In Tolstoy's time this elm was called the Tree of the Poor. Around it used to gather the ailing, who flocked to the writer by the hundreds."

"How interesting!" mocked Olga.

They noticed that the huge old tree had a crutch, a thick support that kept it from falling to one side. As the guide was deeply immersed in his own conversation, they managed to give him the slip and to pass through a narrow door into Tolstoy's house itself.

The first thing that struck them was the extreme modesty in which the great writer had lived. "Look at these floor-boards," said Olga, "they are just like ours. Unpainted and without any rugs. But I like it."

"You know," said Boris, "I must honestly say that I thought the place would be full of all sorts of ornate chandeliers. But the furniture here is old and unmatched."

The low, dark entrance hall was lined with bookcases. There were books in every room. "I should say there are about thirty thousand volumes scattered all over the house," Boris exclaimed, glancing at the shelf in the writer's study.

"He must have been a bit of a polygot," Olga commented, pointing out the books in English, Russian, French, German, and Italian.

"Why, there is even Greek, Hebrew, and Japanese here. Surely he couldn't speak those languages," Boris exclaimed. They opened a number of them and looked at the inscriptions. Some of these were touching, others obviously from very solemn authors. Occasionally there would be a comic note.

It was Olga who discovered that quite a number of these books were gifts. "And you know how I guessed that?" she asked Boris. "Because hundreds of them have never been opened."

Not counting the belles-lettres, Tolstoy's taste ran mostly to religion, philosophy, and history. There were thousands of books in English, at least one quarter of all the volumes came from the pens of American and English authors.

"Shall I tell you something strange about Tolstoy? He hated Shakespeare. Rather, I should say, disliked him. But his love for Dickens was almost reverential." It was the guide again. He had popped up from nowhere. "Do you know what he said of Dickens? 'I think that Charles Dickens is the greatest writer of the nineteenth century. If you sift through all of Western European literature, only Dickens is left. If you sift through all of Dickens only *David Copperfield* is left. If you sift through all of *David Copperfield*, only one chapter, *Tempest*, is left.'"

Boris and Olga could see as a proof of Tolstoy's love for the great Englishman a large portrait of Dickens hanging in the study. There was also a portrait of Henry George, and amongst another collection of mementoes was a phonograph, sent to Tolstoy by Thomas Alva Edison.

"We have moved nothing," said the talkative little guide. "The books that Tolstoy used some thirty years ago still stand in the same order on the roughly-made shelves."

"Now, that's curious!" said Boris, cutting across the library. "What is this? It looks like an engraving of Raphael's Sistine Madonna."

"It's like this," the guide explained, "Tolstoy had his own likes and dislikes, regardless of the canons of art. As you can see, he gives prominence to the rather mediocre reproductions of the Russian painter Orlov, but buries the Sistine Madonna under the books on his shelf."

"I can understand why he did it," It was Olga who spoke. "Orlov's subject was near to his heart. Look at those peasants and the horrible living conditions under which they suffered. It was against these things, surely, that he himself rebelled."

They walked to the parlour and the guide pointed out a table at which Sofia Andreyevna, Tolstoy's wife, copied out *War and Peace*

seven times by hand. They passed through the room into the largest room of the house, the dining-room. There in the centre stood a large table already prepared for dinner. The vases were kept filled with fresh flowers. "Don't you feel that he might enter at any moment and sit down?" said Olga to Boris. "What was it he wrote about this room?"

"I am afraid I don't remember," Boris confessed. But the librarian, who was on their heels, was quick to inform them.

"At our table there are pink radishes," that's what he wrote in his diary, 'golden butter and a browned loaf of bread on the white tablecloth; the garden is green, and our young ladies, dressed in muslin, are happy that there are shady shelters from the heat; but out there, that evil devil, famine, is already at work, covering the fields with weeds. . . .'"

Yasnaya Polyana! How Tolstoy loved this poverty-stricken village and its long-suffering inhabitants. But to the very end of his life his mind was tormented by the realization of his guilt before them—the guilt of a member of the parasitic land-owning class. He did a great deal for the peasants living on his estate; he handed out grain and tinder and even worked for them himself.

"The trouble with Tolstoy," Olga said, "at least, that is my considered opinion, and I have read all his works very carefully, is that he was such a zealous advocate of Henry George's ideas. He thought that private property in land was the principal cause of the misery of the peasantry. But he failed to understand, or even admit, that the expropriation of the proprietors was the only real solution of the problem. Following Henry George's idea, he accepted the expropriation of ground-rent but not a fundamental change in society. He was after Utopia and not a Socialist state. He reflected in this the feelings of the Russian peasant."

"But you must admit," said Boris, "that he was hated by the Tsar's Government exactly for this reason."

"Quite. He knew well that the landed nobility of the country would never think of adopting a reform which, whilst improving the conditions of the people would be detrimental to their own interests. The Russia of his day had neither a constitution nor a parliament. How, then, could his reforms, his panacea come to reality? He did not urge the people to revolt for that would have meant a violent clash, quite contrary to his philosophy. He chose different means. I remember reading a letter which he wrote to the Tsar. He sent it through the Grand Duke Nicolas, who thought fairly high of him."

"We have the letter here," said the librarian, "just here." He ran to the historic document which had been carefully framed. It was dated 16th January, 1902. In the accompanying note to the Grand Duke, he wrote:

I am convinced that the highest aim for which the people of Russia have been striving, and are striving to-day, is to free the land from the right of private property. How great a boon would the Russian Tsar,

who takes up such a cause, be, conferring not only on his people but on the whole world! How secure would he feel relying on the best men of his people and on the masses of his people, who would look to him for the realization of their most cherished and most legitimate aspirations—the granting to every man of the right to gain a livelihood from the land, which God has given not to the few but to all men without exception.

"And here," said Olga, "is the Grand Duke's answer." They both peered through the glass case and read:

You are too great an idealist. You are an idealist, if for no other reason than that you believe it possible to accomplish in Russia what nobody in Europe or even America has been dreaming of. And moreover, to accomplish such a great idea, we need a Czar of the heroic type. Such as Peter the Great, and, of course, a set of collaborators, different from those Nicolas the Second has at his disposal. And I have therefore come to the conclusion that, however idealistic and sympathetic your scheme is, it is impossible of realization.

The librarian gleefully pointed to another letter when he saw the interest of the couple. "I bet that made the old man angry," said Olga.

"It did," Boris replied. "Listen to this." And he read out Tolstoy's answer to the letter from the Tsar's uncle:

"By calling me a great idealist because of my project, you are in fact doing what all the councillors of the Emperor have to do, i.e. to proclaim me as a good-natured fool, who does not know what he is talking about. Secondly, I must say that it appears to me, and I regret very much that it is so, that you have not read and are not acquainted with the substance of Henry George's project. . . . I must say in general, that the realization of my idea, which appears to you to be so impractical, is incomparably more feasible than what is being done at present—the attempt to maintain the autocracy which has already run its course and has not a single lofty idea, but is merely an autocracy for autocracy's sake."

"And Nicholas's uncle," said Olga, "knew what answer to give to the peasants. The suppression of the Revolution in 1905 will live long in their memory."

"Here is another letter," said the librarian. "Since you speak of 1905, here is one that Tolstoy wrote to the Grand Duke in the autumn of that year:

I was thinking of you, of my relations with you, and want to tell you that there is something unnatural in our relations. Wouldn't it be better to break them off? You are a Grand Duke, a rich man, a close relation of the emperor, whereas I am a man who denies and condemns the entire existing order and the ruling power and openly declares it. And because of this contradiction there is something awkward for me in our relations, which, it would seem, we deliberately avoid referring to. I hasten to add that you were always very kind to me, for which I cannot but be grateful to you. Still there is something unnatural in our relations and

for me, in my old age, it is always particularly difficult to be otherwise than plain.

"It's a pity," said Olga, "that the great novelist never realized that his attempts to induce the Tsar and his Prime Minister to abolish private property on land was sincere but futile, as futile as persuading tigers to become vegetarians."

"You know what I would like to do," said Boris. "I would like to meet one of the peasants who knew Tolstoy, who worked with him, perhaps."

"You can certainly do that," said the librarian. "There are quite a number who remember him. They all speak of him as 'the Master', even now."

They decided to go and visit the village and pick out a typical inhabitant to question. At night, about seven o'clock, they entered the large communal hall where a crowd of peasants and their wives and children were listening to the radio and, choosing an elderly man who looked as if he might have lived in the village during Tolstoy's time, they asked him his opinion of the great writer.

The man's name was Kirillov. "Yes," he said, "I knew him. He wanted to make the peasants' lives better. He used to visit us to see how he could help. He used to pay a monthly allowance to Natalya Zharova, who's still alive now but pretty old. With his own hands he built a hut for the widow Anisya Kopylova, and a stove for Vlasov. He taught many of the village children their A B C's, and those now living we still call pupils. Maybe he did dream of the kind of life we are enjoying now, but I don't think he could have gotten to it by following his ideas."

Boris was rather surprised by this remark. But Olga's reaction was immediate. "Tolstoy may not have liked us Communists, but he would have to admit that the Yasnaya Polyana of to-day with its collective farm, its school, its radios, and sewing machines is something better than a Utopian dream. We have made it a reality. To-morrow it will be better, and the next day better still."

BOOK THREE

ONE

SOVIETLAND

FAR from Moscow to our farthest borders,
From the Southern Hills to Northern sea,
Man may pass and feel he is the owner,
Of our land so beautiful and free.
Everywhere our life is wide and joyous
Like the Volga flowing in the Spring.
To the young the road to life lies open,
To the old great happiness we bring.

Sovietland, so dear to every toiler,
Peace and progress build their hopes on thee,
There's no other land the whole world over
Where man walks the earth so proud and free.

Rolling pastures stretch to the horizon,
We have countless towns both great and small.
And the name we give each worker—'Comrade'
Is to us the proudest name of all.
For this name makes every man a brother,
No man's colour robs him of his right,
And it matters not how far we travel,
Every man is comrade in our sight.

Sovietland, so dear to every toiler,
Peace and progress build their hopes on thee,
There's no other land the whole world over
Where man walks the earth so proud and free.

Day by day our happy land advances,
Bright our future as our flag above,
No one else on earth so free from shadows,
No one else so free to laugh and love.
But if any foe should try to smash us,
Try to desolate our land so dear,
Like the thunder, like the sudden lightning,
We shall give our answer sharp and clear.

Fatherland of mine, so vast and spacious,
Filled with forests, plains and rivers fair.
I know not of any other country
Where man's freedom can with ours compare.

TWO

THE tireless throb of the propeller was nearly sending Peter Kovalenko asleep. He had flown from Vladivostok in the Far East, a distance of over 5600 miles. He was out to break the record between Moscow and the Far Eastern citadel. 'I can ease up,' he thought to himself. 'I've already broken it by fourteen hours.'

Moscow was but an hour's flight away. He moved in and out of the clouds, bathing his plane in fleecy whiteness. He had not slept for thirty-six hours and the strain was beginning to tell on him. His face was grey and he felt very hungry despite the countless sandwiches and chocolate that he had eaten. And the perpetual drone of the plane had eaten heavily into his brain.

He was a hero. He would be acclaimed, would probably be given the Order of Hero of the Soviet Union. His heart warmed at the thought. He had designed the plane himself, had almost built it, painstakingly and lovingly. He would prove to the world that the Russians could not only invent new types but could break records like Lindbergh, Mollison, and the others.

Then a sudden pang tore through his heart, a sudden desire overcame him. What if he missed out Moscow? It would disappoint the enormous crowd, that he knew had gathered on the Tushino aerodrome. What if he flew to Kiev instead, thereby paying a tribute to his beloved Ukraine?

He moved his wireless mouthpiece to his lips and spoke: "Hello, Moscow, hello. Have I your permission to give you the slip? I've got enough petrol to carry me through to Kiev. Hello, hello, can I go on to Kiev?"

"You have already broken the record," a cheerful voice told him, "come down, everybody is waiting for you. The band is playing itself hoarse. There is a rumour you have been awarded the title of 'Hero of the Soviet Union'."

Peter's heart bounded inside of him. "Hello, comrade, hello. We've just received a message from Comrade Stalin. He has asked us to give you his congratulations. If you land now, you break the record by fourteen hours twenty minutes."

Peter was circling over the aerodrome. He could see the enormous mass of black heads. As he came down lower, he imagined he could hear the cheering. He certainly could see the waving arms. "I am going to Kiev," he flashed back. "I am going to pay them a surprise. Can I do that, comrade?"

For a moment there was silence. "Hello, hello," Peter called.

"All right, Comrade Kovalenko, proceed to Kiev."

Peter felt a sudden thrill of power as he dived his machine low over the aerodrome and waved his arm out of the cockpit. He could hear the crowd roar. He could see the banners of welcome. The brass band was bursting its lungs. He dipped once, twice, and then once again in a salute and headed like a homing pigeon to Kiev.

He put the joy-stick between his knees and pulled out a writing-pad. Then, wetting the pencil with the tip of his tongue, he hurriedly scribbled a note. He had a mad idea, a frivolous idea. He would put the note in his vacuum flask and send it down by a small parachute which he carried for messages. He would let it float over Petrokovka, right over the collective farm where his father and mother were working and little Mishka. Little Mishka indeed. The boy was twenty-three. But to him, he was always little Mishka.

Peter had not seen his parents for more than three years, and as he flew into the broad Ukrainian steppe dotted with villages and tractor stations, he felt a longing to touch the earth, to eat the good bread, to breathe the early summer air of the Ukraine.

"There is a small aerodrome," he said to himself, "not far from Petrokovka. But then I am disobeying orders. No, I must go to Kiev. I can drop the message."

He came down to about five hundred feet and, circling round the village, he quickly discerned the broad acres of the collective farm. The wheat was already two feet high. It was still green, but there were tinges of yellow. "A promise of a fat harvest!" said this peasant son who had turned pilot.

He could see the apples in the orchard, reddening. It made him smile. A huge drove of cows lowed with idiotic terror as he flew over them. Joyfully he cocked a snoot at them and then, feeling sorry, he promised that one day he would take the biggest cow up for a ride. That would give it something to talk about to its neighbours for the rest of its life. He let his thoughts wander pleasantly, tired as he was.

The noise of the tractors must have drowned the sound of Peter's plane, 'The Red Star'. He intentionally switched off one motor and began to glide. Then, when he was a few hundred feet off the ground, he restarted the engines in a furious roar. The workers in the field heard the noise and lifted up their heads. They began waving to him, shouting. They weren't quite sure why the plane had come. Perhaps it was going to be used to spray the fields with chemicals as a safeguard against locusts. Perhaps it was a Red Army pilot who had lost his way.

Peter threw out the vacuum bottle with a small parachute attached and watched it floating slowly to the ground. Then, with a sudden exhilaration, he was off to Kiev.

THREE

THE liquidation of the kulaks which was undertaken in 1929 was of the greatest economic and historical significance to the Soviet Union. It signalized the break between the Old Russia and the New as perhaps nothing else.

For centuries the peasant had farmed his small strip of land whenever he could find time from his other duties on the landlord's estates. The horse—a hungry lean beast—and the wooden plough, these were symbols of economic oppression, for little could he earn from his

labour which was bitter and never ending. Ignorance, poverty, and disease, these were his lot.

But conversative by nature, inured to the old ways, he refused to enter into large-scale farming, such as was practised on the collective farms or the Kolkhoz. The unfamiliar tractor was the work of the devil. He felt that, in any case, it was impossible for him to grow rich together with his fellow-peasants. He felt that his own personal initiative could never be rewarded inside a collective organization. The kulaks and the money-lenders and the priests, all these played a subtle role to frustrate the peasants' entry into the collective farm. It is said that less than 2 per cent of peasant households adopted collective farming during the years of the new economic policy between 1921 and 1929.

By 1930, the collectivization had reached more than 75 per cent. How was this done?

It was done by the ruthless suppression of the oppositional elements such as the kulaks. By education, propaganda, by the sheer proof that a tractor can do the work of more than twenty men in a day. That it was possible by collective labour to achieve better living conditions, better education, better clothes, as well as the simple amenities of civilized life like the radio.

It was a revolution within a revolution. It was the dawn of an era which promised that famine would never pull its dreadful mantle over the rich Sovietland. The opposition was bitter. The suppression no less. But the only men who had to fear, who refused to accept the new conditions, were the profiteers, and the greedy peasants as well as the ignorant ones.

The industrialization of the Soviet Union could never have been possible without the collectivization of the farms. The one demanded the other. The growing military strength of the Soviet Union could not have been possible. The economy could not have been possible. The exchange of goods between town and country—an ever-present problem of even the most highly organized nations—was solved.

FOUR

VASIL KOVALENKO frowned. He spat furiously on the floor, cursing the devil's interference with the breakdown of the radio. And to think of all the time he had lost in neatly arranging that Comrade Stalin's speech should be broadcast to the peasants of Petrokovka! Even the services of the only mechanic they had, Ivan the Lame, who knew so much about sewing-machines, were called for, and he and Vasili Kovalenko worked for two nights to install all the wires that went to build the aerial.

Over fifty people, active workers and poor Cossacks of Petrokovka, breathed with a single breath when the first words of Comrade Stalin shook the air.

"Everybody is now talking of the success achieved by the Soviet

Government in the sphere of the collective farm movement. Even our enemies are compelled to admit . . ." And just when all the peasants wanted to hear what the enemy admitted, the radio broke down. No wonder that Vasili Kovalenko swore aloud and told Ivan the Lame that he was the son of a bitch and knew nothing of wireless. Even the protestations of Ivan's wife, who felt insulted that her Ivan who knew so much about sewing-machines was blamed, were of no avail.

"Well, Comrades," Vasili bellowed, "I'll have to try and tell you myself what Comrade Stalin expects from us all." He searched frantically in his pockets for the piece of paper his son Peter had sent him from Moscow. "Curse him! I can't find even that now. Well, I'll have to do it on my own," he muttered. "I managed to fight our enemies during the Revolution and I'm not going to be baulked now by a mere slip of paper."

Kovalenko spat again. "Comrades!" he opened his speech. "You all know me and I have been elected your Chairman in order that I may help you to organize a collective farm, and to destroy the accursed kulaks, the blood-thirsty leeches. I shall not say much, but just as much as we missed from Comrade Stalin's speech which we ought to have heard to-day.

"You must all join together in a collective farm. And why must you all join together in a collective farm . . . curse you! Because it is impossible to go on living as we are. Even the amount of grain we manage to collect is left to rot in the ground because the kulaks do not want to co-operate with us. And, as Comrade Stalin was going to tell you, we must grow more wheat and collect more. But how are you going to sow more and collect more? With bare hands or a wooden plough? Only the tractor can get us out of that difficulty. And can anybody tell me how much grain we can get now in our present state?"

Ivan the Lame felt it time to interfere. "With your cracked hands glued to the plough-handle from daybreak to sunset you will plough over some five or six acres."

"Not you, you lame dog! Six acres, indeed! And supposing the earth is hard?" a ruddy Cossack interjected.

"Shut your mouth!" came the shrill voice of Ivan's wife. "Lame or not lame, my husband can get more out of the earth than you. But you want three, or even four, good yoke of oxen to do it. And where have we got them? Scarcely five or six of us have a pair of bullocks between us, let alone oxen."

"That's not the point. You'd better shove your apron into your mouth and be quiet," came another hoarse voice from the back. Ivan's wife was not to be put off. "You can talk sense to your good-for-nothing wife, but not to me . . . I have enough brains for both of you." Someone else intervened, trying to stop the bickering of the peasants. "And how much could you plough with a tractor?" he said, addressing Kovalenko.

Vasili waited till there was silence and then answered: "With a

tractor, comrades, with one that Moscow would send us and with an expert driver on the seat, we can plough ten and twenty times more in a single day than we can do in a week."

The peasants gasped in bewilderment. "Well, I'll be damned!" Ivan the Lame summed up his statement.

"Now that's fine. That's the horse we need for our collective farm. But a tractor costs money and cannot be used on the small piece of land we each have. So what is the answer?" Kovalenko queried.

"All our village has to go into a collective farm," somebody answered.

"That's what Comrade Stalin was going to tell us to-day. The Party proposes complete collectivization, so as to hitch you on to a tractor and lift you out of your want. That's what Comrade Lenin said before Stalin, on his death-bed—'only in the collective farm can our peasant find salvation from his poverty.' And who are we not to obey?" Kovalenko banged the table with his fist so violently that the glass jumped off in pieces.

"Wait a bit . . . and don't bang the table to bits. You nearly blinded me with a piece of the glass as it is," burly-headed and squinting Dimitri Ramasov the Cossack chipped in.

"Ask to speak and then say what you want." Ivan the Lame thought it necessary to enforce discipline.

"I will tell you without asking permission," Dimitri weighed him down, squinting so terribly that it appeared as though he were looking simultaneously at Kovalenko and at the lame Ivan. "Whose fault was it that we lived like beggars and slaves? It was our kulaks who bled us white and the Communist Party did not do anything to stop them."

"You are lying like a bloody counter-revolutionary," shouted the lame Ivan, who was not going to be put out by a squinting good-for-nothing.

"I'll prove it!" Dimitri went pale, and taking no heed of the lame Ivan gesticulating with his fist, he addressed himself to Vasili Kovalenko. "I was one of the first to join the collective farm, I was, and we failed because you did not support us. Did you change the bull for a motor-cycle without asking permission? And who was it sold our three sheep and a young cow for a motor-car to stroll about in? And you call me a bloody counter-revolutionary!"

"Steady now," Vasili Kovalenko felt forced to intervene, his facial muscles twitching under his skin. "Let me finish and don't butt in, please."

"You needn't try to work us up with propaganda. We know our duty and we'll join the collective farm," shouted an old red cavalryman, whose ribbons proclaimed him as an old revolutionary.

"We agree with the collective farm," all the peasants thought it wise to shout, "and we'll beat the devil out of the kulaks' behinds."

"That's fine, that's fine," Vasili was pleased with the support he received from the old soldier. "We all fought for the Revolution and we are going to see that our rights are respected," he concluded.

The lame Ivan pulled up his shirt. "Look here," he said, showing

scars on his chest. "What do you think I got these for? Not for sitting in front of the fire-place, I can assure you." He pulled up the edge of his shirt farther and showed the terrible scars which puckered his skin on his chest and belly.

"Don't mind us, you shameless devil. Pull down your trousers and show us your lame leg," exclaimed the widow Dunia, who was a friend of Dimitri Ramasov and thought it right to interfere.

"And you would like him to, wouldn't you?" Ivan's wife replied contemptuously.

"All of you shut up," Kovalenko commanded, who felt that the meeting was degenerating into personal bickering. "It isn't a shame for one to show one's wounds received on the field of battle. I can show you a few, if you want me to, and in quite private places. And look at Ivan's trousers. . . ." Kovalenko laughed. "They are only trousers in name and would scare many a young girl if he passed by them in daylight."

"Ha, ha, ha!" the peasants rejoined. "That's just what he'd like to do." Everybody began to shout.

"Quiet, we can't hear!" somebody interposed.

"Can't you talk in turn, you devils." With considerable effort Vasili Kovalenko succeeded at last in restoring order. "That's the policy of our Party," he declared. "What are you knocking at an open door for? And Comrade Stalin had reckoned it all out to the last figure. 'Free the kulak of his life,' said Stalin. 'Hand his property to the collective farmers and you'll have the money for buying your tractors.' What do you think of that?" Kovalenko smiled. "Have you heard about all this? . . . Stalin was going to tell us to-day. . . ."

"Then what are we shouting about? Let's start our collective farm first and then we'll see what we'll do with the kulaks. We'll all join to-night. Let's write down our names and then we'll start smashing the kulaks."

Vasili Kovalenko drew up a sheet of paper for the peasants to put down their names, declaring that they voluntarily joined up for the collective farm.

After a few more shouts the meeting was declared at an end.

FIVE

THE effect of Stalin's speech, or better Kovalenko's interpretation of it at the village meeting, had an electric power on Petrokovka. The church bells were not removed; the problem, as Stalin put it, was a matter of growing more grain, not of socializing all the chickens. And it was Vasili Kovalenko who led the fight against the kulaks and men who opposed the collectivization of the land.

Dawn had not yet come when Yasha Burenko, the kulak, aroused his son and the women. They lit the stove and sharpened the knives on the whetstone. Burenko possessed seventeen sheep and five goats. He knew which of the sheep were in lamb and those which had already

borne. He caught and by the feel sorted out the rams, sheep, and lambs, pushing them one by one into the warm shed. Drawing his white fur cap over his eyes, Burenko caught a gelded ram by its cold twisted horn and threw it to the ground. Then, lying with his breast against the outstretched animal, he pulled back its head and cut its throat with a knife, setting free the dark streaming blood.

"Sons of bitches," murmured Burenko. "They won't collectivize my beasts." He twinkled with one eye to his son to bring the rest. Yasha Burenko had a good eye to business. He did not want the meat from his sheep to feed the Red Army soldiers, or Soviet workers in some factory. They were all of the Soviet and as far as he was concerned responsible for his misery. The Bolsheviks and Yasha Burenko were mutual enemies, at daggers drawn. All his life Burenko had been attracted to gold and silver like a child to fire, and his position was envious to all and sundry before the Revolution. And now they wanted him to be just a peasant of the collective farm. His heart stopped beating when he saw all the fabulous things life had in store for him vanish like smoke. In his thoughts Burenko used to picture himself attired, not in the shabby mended trousers of the peasant, but in a pair made of silk and imported from Kiev at that. And the dreams he had about his son whom he would send to a military school, and when an officer would see him bring an educated lady into his home as his wife. Not a few were the day-dreams Burenko had indulged in during those unforgettable years, when life had sparkled and crackled in his hands like a new hundred-rouble note. And then, bang! The bloody Revolution had come, breathing its death-chill of unseen shocks to him. Burenko had seen the rock he stood on tremble beneath his feet. And yet he was not going to be at a loss, he determined. He summoned all his sobriety and cunning and was making order out of anarchy. He had become a kulak, a property owner. He had twisted left and right with the Soviet bureaucrats and had succeeded in elevating himself above the ignorant peasant.

And just when he saw himself planted on both feet the ground had given way again. That was why he was the enemy of the Bolshevik Government. No collective building for him. He must either take sides with the counter-revolutionaries or perish.

And that was why Yasha Burenko, a peasant from Petrokovka, was slaughtering all his sheep. Better to see the carcasses rot than give them away to the blood thirsty Bolsheviks.

"You must slaughter your cattle," a voice told him, "thus cutting the ground under the Bolsheviks' feet. Let the oxen and the cow and the mare starve from lack of nourishment and attention." I will get more, he told himself, when these accursed Communists are swept away. I am sorry all the same for the mare. If only I could save her. Golden thoughts were running through his mind while Burenko was twisting the head of yet another sheep and thrusting his knife savagely into its gullet. The acrid stench of blood evoked an attack of vomiting in his son, who could not bear the sight of blood. He turned in a hurry out of the shed.

"What the devil did you come to look for if you can't stand blood? Or would you like yourself to be bled white by the Soviet?" Burenko threw his cap behind his back and leant over the last goat.

It had taken three hours of hard work to finish the slaughtering, and it was now breakfast time. The skinned carcasses were hung in the barn, and the women put the fat sheep-tails on to boil for soup. Burenko's wife had hardly washed her hands from the fat when she heard the rickety gate squeak.

"Man, it's Kovalenko," she shouted, seeing who it was coming into the yard. Yasha Burenko went whiter than the winter snow in the Ukraine. Vasili was already wiping his muddy boots on the doormat. He gave a hollow cough and entered with a confident stride.

"Merciful God," Burenko thought, "I am finished and done for. The way that son of a bitch walks in, as if he owns my house, as though the world belonged to him! This is the end. I suppose he is going to arrest me for disobeying the order of the Moscow government. He has found out, the swine."

A sharp knock at the door interrupted Burenko's thoughts. "May I come in, comrade?"

"Come in, come in, friend," Burenko meant to answer, but his lips were glued and his voice was hardly a whisper.

Vasili Kovalenko entered without waiting for the invitation and Burenko remained seated, immovable. He did not dare to rise because he felt his legs trembling underneath the table.

"Your health, friend," Vasili Kovalenko greeted first.

"Your health, comrade," Burenko's wife managed to say, trying to help her husband. "It's a heavy day in front of us."

"Quite right, Matushka," mumbled Kovalenko. "There are hard times ahead of us peasants if we are to succeed in our collective farm. What do you think, Yasha?" He slipped a hand into his pocket and pulling out a handkerchief as dirty as his sleeve, blew noisily.

"Come right in, comrade," Burenko muttered belated.

"What the devil's the matter with that bull?" wondered Kovalenko, as he noticed Burenko's pale face and quivering lips. Then aloud: "Eh, what do you think of our plans?" he repeated.

He's torturing me with nonsense, Burenko thought, and then suddenly will say: 'Get ready to follow me!' Perhaps someone has informed him about my anti-Bolshevist activity. There will be a search at any moment now. Recovering slightly from his fright, he felt the blood rushing to his head as he reddened. Why doesn't he come to the point, damn him!

"You'll have something to eat with us, won't you, friend?" Burenko invited.

"I want to have a talk with you, Burenko," Vasili answered. "You are a good farmer, and your corn and your animals have been the pride of the village. You have always been right about the rain and the drought, and how to preserve the seed for the next year. Fact! I am thinking seriously of putting your name forward as our future

manager of the collective farm. I know you are a first-class organizer . . ."

"Come in, come right in, comrade Chairman. Matushka, get the samovar ready for our comrade and friend here. Or would you like to have a drop of our cabbage soup? Or a pickled gherkin, perhaps? You are the leader of our new Russia and our new life. . . ." Burenko was mad with joy. Through his babbling and praises, he felt as though a mountain had been lifted from his chest.

"Of course, comrade Chairman, of course, I will help with all my strength to teach our poor ignorant Cossacks out of their grandfathers' way. I will show them how collective farms ought to be run. Where is the vodka?" he shouted, as if he had already ordered drinks.

SIX

Two days before Peter came skidding over the sky of Petrokovka, Boris and Olga had paid a surprise visit to the village. It was their usual summer vacation of a month and they had decided to give the old folks one of their rare visits. This was only about the third time that Olga had seen her father and mother. It was the first since Petrokovka could boast of a collective farm. They arrived by train at the small village station, carrying an enormous suit-case full of presents.

"I wonder why we don't come here more often," Boris said to Olga. In the last three years Olga had qualified as a doctor, and was practising in one of the large modern children's clinics in Moscow. Boris had established himself in Kiev but lived in Moscow for a good three-quarters of the year, preparing plans for workers' houses, libraries, crèches, and theatres.

"I sometimes think," Olga told him, "that I ought to come and organize a crèche here in Petrokovka. It would be pleasant to live near Papa." They were received with open arms. The presents were admired and instantly put to use.

Kovalenko was now fifty-three, but carried his years very well. There was no sag about his face. There was still the same innocent, weather-beaten expression on it. He had taken to peace remarkably well although now and again, when the lads from the village went to join up as conscripts to the Red Army, he would take down his enormous sabre that had slain five thousand White Guards (so he claimed) and, feeling very much the military man, he would deliver them a speech. "Don't imagine yourself soldiers," he would begin, "just because you got a uniform and a gun. You are puppies. The milk from your mother's breast is barely dried on your lips. To grow a soldier, you must grow hard. You must learn how to shoot straight. Some of you should become good Tankists as you are used to the tractor. Don't all try to be commanders. Someone has to lead. If you have any problems, write to me. I will answer everything on strategy, discipline, communications, and horses, especially horses."

The conscripts cheered the old man to an echo and marched off singing the old revolutionary songs to his honour. And Kovalenko would put back his sword into the scabbard and hang it lovingly on the wall of his *isba*.

Despite his inordinate love for horses, he realized the importance of the tractor, of the machine over manual and animal labour. But Petrokovka still boasted of its fine herd of mares and some of the best cavalry units of the Red Army drew their animals from Petrokovka. The horses were in Kovalenko's special care. He loved them as he loved his children.

There were more than five hundred of them, but each one he had named as it came into the possession of the collective farm. He recognized them instantly. He knew their temperament, whether they were fierce or meek, whether their legs were strong; and during the winter months he and Maruska, his wife, would tend the foals and those animals that had grown sick.

Maruska, probably inspired by Olga's example, had qualified as a senior attendant in the veterinary station. She felt herself a 'professional' and once or twice boasted that she knew more than the doctor in the village clinic. "Of course," said Kovalenko backing her up, "a horse is a far more delicate creature. If Maruska can cure the grey mare's rheumatism with salt and compresses, don't you think she can do the same to you, Vanka? Or do you think you are finer than a horse?"

Poor Vanka was a decrepit old man who was living his last years on a State pension. He had a neat brick cottage and a radio with ear-phones, for he was very deaf. He always complained of rheumatism. When the village doctor had proved incapable of curing what was really the result of senility, he would go to Maruska for her salt and compresses. The clinic doctor had no objection, because Vanka was in such terror of not admitting that he had been cured that for weeks on end he would abstain from visiting the doctor and thus enable him to attend to more urgent cases.

Periodically Vasya Kovalenko's wife would think she was pregnant and the stir that this news caused in the homestead re-echoed in other villages. But all her pregnancies were false alarms and Kovalenko was very irritated by them. "You are making me into a laughing stock with the neighbours," he would complain. "Why do you whisper to the women that you are going to have a baby? Who do you think you are, St. Anne, to have a baby at the age of fifty?"

They were having one of these periodic baby rows when Olga and Boris came in. They stopped quarrelling for a moment and embraced them vigorously. "So you have remembered us at last!" said Maruska, weeping with joy and smothering Boris in her bosom.

"And what have you brought us this time?" asked Kovalenko, tapping the suit-case gently with the toe of his boot.

"What are you two quarrelling about?" asked Olga sternly. "We heard you as we came in through the gate. Do you think they deserve their presents, Boris?"

"Oh come, come," said Kovalenko impatiently, "that's not the way to talk to your parents. Open the case. My eyes are watering trying to stare through the hide. What have you got there? I hear that they have got electrical razors in America. I'd love to have one of them."

Olga and Boris put the case down and opened it. "I am afraid there is no electrical razor," said Boris apologetically. "But we have bought you a lovely new cut-throat. It's nearly as big as your sword."

"And will cover your face in one sweep, Papa," said Olga.

"Just what he needed," grumbled Maruska. "He has been shaving one of the horses who has been ill with his razor. Look at him now!"

Kovalenko felt his stubble-beard shamefacedly. "The horse needed the razor more than I did," he explained. "Oh!"

Boris handed him a beautiful new instrument.

Kovalenko opened it professionally, stropped it affectionately on his palm on which he had previously spat and then, holding the razor edge up to the light, admired it with many clicks of his tongue. "They make wonderful things in Moscow," he exclaimed; "have you brought me anything else?"

Boris pulled out a propelling pencil. Kovalenko was thrilled. "Just what I wanted. I am going to write a long report with this one. The better the pencil, the better my reports are. They inspire me to write. My, isn't this one smooth, and look how the lead wriggles in and out, Maruska. What won't you people think of next?"

"And here is an electric iron for you, Mother!" Olga handed the shining object over.

But Kovalenko seized it immediately and inspected it. "It looks like one of these pocket radio sets. I bet you can hear music as you iron. What are these little knobs for?" It took some time to dissuade him that the electric iron was not a wireless set. He immediately lost interest in it.

Then he decided to grope in the case himself and, producing an enormous bale of printed cotton, he insisted that Maruska should make him a shirt of it, a holiday shirt.

"But this is women's cloth," Olga protested.

"It can be a man's cloth," said Kovalenko, "it depends how you cut it. And these flowers, they are so real that I can almost smell them. I would like them round the collar with the flowers standing up and the stalks downwards." He draped an enormous sheet of printed cotton round his neck. "I am an old fool," he said, sighing sadly. "I am a soldier. These are childish things." He wrapped the cotton round the bale solemnly and handed it over to Maruska.

"What's this?" cried Kovalenko, pulling a small sketch out of Boris's sketch-book. It was a picture entitled 'The Mother.' "What do you mean, The Mother? Where is the baby? All I can see is Olga."

"Well, that's all you can see just now," said Olga. "Don't be so impatient. Boris saw me making some clothes and insisted on sketching me. That's all."

"There," said Kovalenko, "at least your daughter will have a real baby." Maruska burst into tears.

"What is all this nonsense?" Boris asked. "Why are you crying, Mother?"

"Vasya thinks I am too old to have a baby," Maruska blubbered. "But I do want a baby so. Now that Mishka is gone I have no one to cuddle and kiss. Vasya spends all his time with the horses. If it wasn't for the club and the library I don't know what I'd do."

"The fact is," said Kovalenko, "that the silly woman gives us all a scare every month. It's not the thing to talk about before children, but since you are going to be a mother yourself, I can tell you, Olga. Her tummy swells up like a melon. Even the doctor is fooled. But I know that she is just a great faker. At first I believed her and felt happy. But then she gets deflated before you know where you are. The baby isn't a baby but a lot of wind. If I didn't love her so much, I'd divorce her."

Boris and Olga laughed. The mother wiped the tears out of her eyes and appreciated the joke.

"You know," said Kovalenko, "I was thinking that before I died I'd like someone to paint my picture. On a big sheet of paper, the size of this wall here. I'd be sitting on a horse with the sabre in my hand, swinging it over my head, perhaps. The great thing is to paint my horse and the sabre. You can leave me out if it is too difficult, but I must have the sabre in, the sabre at all cost."

Boris was thrilled with the idea. "We'll begin to-morrow morning. When the light is good, you can sit on your favourite horse and swing your sabre over your head for as long as you like."

"And what shall I wear?" asked Kovalenko, "not these greasy mechanic's clothes. I'll wear my Cossack kaftan and my white sheepskin hat. I shall swing the sabre over my head and make a speech. Pity you can't paint a speech as well. But one day I shall have a gramophone record made, and every time anybody looks at my picture they will put on the record. Then they will hear and see me at the same time. Me, Kovalenko, cavalry commander, guerilla fighter, Cossack, collective farmer. Just think," he said, scratching his head, "I have been all these things. I wonder what I will be next."

SEVEN

THE arrival of the vacuum flask with Peter's message in it caused delirious rejoicing in Petrokovka. For Peter was one of their own. He had promised to name one of his planes after the village. The collective farmers were certain that whenever Peter's name was mentioned the name of Petrokovka was given to him like a surname. He was 'our Peter' to all of them. The man with the future, the hero of countless records. Before he arrived they had learned from the *Pravda* that Peter had been awarded the highest decoration of the Soviet Union, that of Hero of his native land.

But to Boris and Olga the news came as a shock. They had never regained touch with Peter. Boris was quite frankly frightened of Peter's Communist orthodoxy. And Olga considered him a memory of the past although she was secretly proud of him, secretly happy that he should be her brother.

Her father had often upbraided her for not writing to Peter, but Olga put him off with one excuse or another. "Mishka is my favourite brother," she used to say. "I would like to see him."

Mishka was now twenty-three. When an area had been set aside in the Far East for the Jews, a call was made for skilled labour, and Mishka, who had a great feeling for adventure, felt that this was an opportunity 'to see the world'.

He had left early in the year of 1933 as a fully qualified metallurgical engineer. New deposits of iron had been found and he was helping to bring them to the surface.

When the news came that Peter was coming to Petrokovka, Olga's first instinct was to make some excuse to return with Boris to Moscow.

"I don't want to meet him particularly," said Boris. "I can't forgive him."

"But there is nothing to forgive," Olga replied; "after all, he did what he thought best for me. And it did turn out for the best, didn't it, Boris? What I am afraid of is that he will tell Mother and Father."

"Do you think it would shock them?"

Olga took Boris by the hand. "We can't talk in here," she said: "let us go outside into the barn."

"But really," said Boris, "it was very stupid of us not to have told them ourselves, and after all, there is nothing dishonourable in a Prophylactorium. Fate played a dirty trick on you in Moscow. What else could you do? I am certain that they would understand. Shall we tell them?"

"I'd rather not, Boris dear," Olga pleaded. "It will come as a shock to them. I admit we should have told them, but since we haven't, isn't it better to forget it? Let's go to Moscow."

"Wouldn't it seem a little obvious?" Boris said. "I mean, just packing our bags and going away before Peter arrives? To tell you the truth—I am surprised Peter hasn't told Father before."

"Peter isn't like that," Olga defended him, "really he isn't."

"Well, what do you propose doing?"

"I propose we stay and face him. After all, it's more than ten years since I have seen him. He was your friend, wasn't he, Boris? You went through a civil war together. I have often been very sorry that I came between you two, because I think you genuinely liked each other."

Boris shrugged his shoulders. "He is a blasted hero now. I cannot get on with heroes. I bet he has become an enormous prig and he will start reading me lectures. You know I am a free sort of a fellow. I don't swallow the Party gospel hook and bait. I like to think."

"Well, perhaps you will be able to do some thinking together. After

all, you must admit the regime has done wonders—not only given us an opportunity to do creative and useful work—but look at Petrokovka. You are not a peasant. But I remember this village as a little girl. I remember being left on the floor when I was two years old, crying with hunger. My mother would go out into the field to work. Before she left, she would tie some pieces of rag stuffed with black bread which she had previously chewed so that I could allay my hunger. I don't know how anyone survived!"

"Oh, don't think I am against the regime. Only some of the things they do restrict one's spirit."

"But discipline is necessary, Boris. It has been necessary in both our lives. After all, the Prophylactorium taught me that. You learned it, too, as an artist. Just think, you were moving from one ism to another, tossing and turning. You called it self-expression."

"Well, it was self-expression. A young man must twist and turn, especially a painter. You cannot restrict an artist. You cannot tell him to paint posters all his life. I grew tired of being an advertising agent for the Party—telling people how to milk cows or the right way to wash their teeth."

"Now, now," said Olga, "don't you agree that culture begins with cleaning one's teeth and ends with Beethoven?"

They both laughed. "Oh, I remember that one," said Boris. "But now the people have learned to clean their teeth. It's time they began to get some real culture, began to look at some real paintings, apart from pictures of tractors and machines and Comrade Stalin."

"But surely," Olga said, "it is only a phase. The people must admire something. Our age expresses machines and Comrade Stalin is our leader. To-morrow, you can go back to your nudes and vases of flowers and landscapes. We are only just cleaning the people's eyes of the mud in which they have been lying, for the devil knows how many centuries."

"To-morrow, to-morrow, always to-morrow. And in the meantime artists like myself have to break their hearts."

"It's a matter of being practical," Olga emphasized, waving her hand wearily. She was growing a little impatient with Boris. They always seemed to return to the same subject. "We are waging war," she said deliberately. "And in war-time the individual is apt to be somewhat of a luxury. We are still building. Keep your dreams. But you have done so much already. Think of the houses you have built, the happiness you have caused. That is some recompense, surely?"

"Yes, I admit that has been something. Anyhow, I am going to have a holiday. I am going to paint your father on his rip-roaring horse. I am going to do it with all my soul, with all the bright colours that there are in the Ukraine. I'll make an ikon of your papa."

Someone stirred in the shadows. As the figure emerged, a silky, over-polite voice bade them good morning.

It was Burenko. "Please don't mind me," he said, "I have just been looking over the barn. It's going to be a fine harvest. And it's all ours, ours by virtue of our Socialist labour. Good morning, comrades."

Olga caught Boris's hand as the collective farm director disappeared through the open door. "Do you think he heard us?" she asked. "Do you think he heard about the Prophylactorium?"

"Oh, blast him," said Boris irritably. "I am not afraid of him. I'd like to put my fist into his pumpkin face. It would squelch. I can almost hear the noise. The man is without bones."

EIGHT

THE next morning Boris and his father-in-law rose early. The cocks were crowing their heads off, standing arrogantly on the fences, raising their red combs at the sun and yelling at it. A new day.

The bright crimson dawn was soft and warm. A small wind carried the scent of the blossoming trees in the orchard. Kovalenko dressed hurriedly in his old battle-worn Cossack outfit. It was patched in so many places. But he put it on very gently as if it was a spider's web. Then, pulling on his sword, he forgot to put on his boots. "Pity," he said aloud to Boris, "I haven't got two legs. But you will have to paint me from one side. I don't want the picture disfigured with this wooden clod."

Boris was already dressed and was carrying his easel on his back.

"Oh, never mind about that," he called, "get your horse. We'll go into the sunflower field."

"But you won't paint my wooden stump, will you?"

"Listen," said Boris, "you are a hero. That wooden stump belongs to the picture. I shall call it the one-legged horseman of the Apocalypse."

"That's too damn religious. I am no horseman of the Apocalypse. No," Kovalenko insisted, "call it Kovalenko—plain, just like that. And if they don't know who that is, so much the worse for them. You know, if I'd known you were going to paint my picture, I would have grown a fine pair of moustaches like Budenny's. But these will have to do." He tugged despondently at his fair moustache.

They went into the stables and Kovalenko found himself faced with another problem. "Which one of these beasts shall I have? I love them all impartially. Which one of you," he called out to the horses, "would like to be painted with Kovalenko?"

A hundred horses answered his remark with a long neigh. They thought he had come to give them fodder.

"What do you say, Boris, if you paint a bit of one horse and a bit of another? Mazurka Number Two here, she has a lovely head. You see, I chose her because of the star. She reminded me of my old

Mazurka. But she hasn't got such a strong behind. Now, Grom (thunder) the horse over there, he has a behind made of cast iron. I propose you paint Mazurka's head and Grom's behind, do you agree?"

"It's a bit difficult," said Boris, "but I'll try. I get your point, You are sure you wouldn't like that filly's forehead? I am afraid the horse will look like a pudding by the end. No. Get on to Mazurka and leave the rest to me. I promise you I've got a skilful brush and I'll give her a behind like a rhinoceros."

Kovalenko seemed pleased with the suggestion. He tried to leap on the horse to show Boris that he had lost none of his equestrian skill. But the horse suddenly moved off and all that Kovalenko could do was to give a pathetic little hop. His wooden peg stuck tight in the ground, and he ran round it with his whole foot like a clown. "Hey, help me," he cried. "My foot thinks I am trying to sink a well-shaft."

Boris tugged at his father-in-law's heavy bulk and managed to disengage his foot. He then lent him a hand to mount Mazurka. The horse was frisky. But Kovalenko soothed her with a fierce kiss inside one of her soft ears. "Now, now, my beauty, we are not going on a cavalry charge. Behave then, or I'll feed you to the tractors." And he reined the horse expertly.

The creature whinnied with delight at this exhibition of will on the part of her master. She lifted up her left foreleg and pawed the ground prettily as if doing a dance and then, with a whinny of delight, trotted out of the stable, her tail held high.

Boris ran after the horseman. "Hey, not so fast," he yelled.

But Mazurka paid no attention. She trotted gleefully into the sunflower field and began running round in circles, jumping over mounds, skidding a little, kicking up the dust. If it hadn't been for the rider, she would most certainly have lain down on her back and kicked her feet at the sun.

Kovalenko reined her sternly. "We are going to pose for a painter, you immortal piece of horseflesh."

The horse, as if understanding the importance of her rôle, obliged. "Excellent," Boris said. "I am going to make a few charcoal drawings to capture the spirit of the thing before putting on the paint."

Kovalenko was disappointed. "What is all this charcoal? I want live paint. You think I have put on my tunic just to be done in charcoal? Squeeze out your pretty colours, young man. But see that you don't make my face too red, otherwise they'll think I am a drunkard. I'd hate Comrade Stalin to think that. You know," he continued, "you might do another picture of me sitting on a tractor."

"Let me get this one down first," Boris laughed. "Well, come on, raise your sword there by that big sunflower. Show me how you swing it."

Kovalenko pulled his sabre joyfully out of his scabbard, kissed it

like a knight of some chivalrous order, and then made it whistle through the air. "I can still play a tunc on it," he said. "Wheee O, for a good thick head to cut off. Pity there are no White Guards now, or Germans. The sword is getting rusty in its scabbard."

"Why don't you cut off Burenko's head?" said Boris sourly, "I don't like his sneaking face."

"It's not his face that we like," said Kovalenko; "he is a capable director, and so long as he does his business we'll give him our loyal support." That put an end to that conversation.

Boris hurriedly did the outline in charcoal and then proceeded to make a number of copies with few alterations. He made Kovalenko turn his head in profile, then full face. Then he suggested that he should make Mazurka rear.

"I don't want to be painted like a statue," said Kovalenko. "Why does every statue always show a rearing horse?"

"It's the line," said Boris, "it's the energy."

"Isn't this energy enough for you?" Kovalenko swung his sword viciously through the air. "Concentrate on my sword," he advised. Boris promised that he would.

For a full hour Boris made sketches. Kovalenko held his sword above his head until his arm began to ache. But he was too proud to admit it. "Oh, I say, I am sorry," said Boris, "you can put your sword down."

"Never, never," said Kovalenko, "never, until you finish the painting."

"Now, be patient, be patient," counselled Boris, "I have only just finished the sketches. I'll start with the oil to-morrow."

"You mean to tell me I have got to stay here until to-morrow morning like this?" asked Kovalenko fearfully.

"No, I have told you, we've finished for to-day. Come on. Put it back into your scabbard and we'll go home and have some breakfast."

Kovalenko, very dejected and at the same time very curious to see what Boris had done, rode over to the easel and peered down at the incomprehensible lines. "Is that me and Mazurka?" he said. "It's terrible. They do that sort of thing in the kindergarten. What sort of a painter are you?"

"Wait and see," said Boris, "wait and see. I'll have you alive in all your splendour in a couple of days' time. Be patient."

"But people paint a tractor quicker than that. And a tractor is a big thing," said Kovalenko. "It takes you two days to cover a little canvas like that. Really, you don't know what hard work means in Moscow."

"I am not a tractor painter," Boris explained. "I am trying to capture your likeness, that is odd."

Kovalenko was baffled. He had nothing to say.

They went back silently to the stable. As they came out of the field, they saw a motor-car approaching and Mazurka suddenly threw a temperamental fit. She objected most to the sudden perfume

of petrol that filled the air. It was too early, thought Mazurka, for these iron beasts to be out. She kicked her back legs up and tried to throw the rider.

But Kovalenko gave her a wallop on her behind with his palm and then felt sorry. "Now, my beauty, behave yourself or I'll put a spanner between your teeth." The horse quietened down and whinnied mischievously at the approaching car.

When the car was a few yards off, Kovalenko gave a tremendous yell. "Peter," he shouted, "Petka, my son. You are just in time for breakfast."

Peter jumped out of the car; then, waving his hand to the driver, approached his father. For a moment, he did not recognize Boris. "Peter," said Kovalenko, "you are a hero."

"Don't mention it, Father," Peter replied, "at the moment I am a very tired man."

Peter came up to Boris and held out his hand. "Good morning, comrade."

Boris replied uncertainly.

"What's all this comradeship about?" Kovalenko commanded. "Why don't you two men embrace? It must be years since you have seen each other."

But Boris stammered.

"I didn't recognize you, Boris," Peter exclaimed. "You have changed. You have grown older." The two men laughed nervously. "Well, so have you."

"Olga is here," Kovalenko announced; "she will be so happy to see you. And she is a doctor now!"

"A doctor! That's wonderful," Peter exclaimed. "She is a brave girl. How long have you been married?"

"Six years," Boris replied.

"I see. That's when she left . . ." Peter interrupted himself, and glanced at his father and then at Boris. "Since she qualified?"

"No. She only qualified in 1931."

"Oh, of course, I was forgetting. And you, Boris? What have you been doing?"

"I am an architect. I dabble in painting."

"He dabbles in painting," Kovalenko protested. "What do you mean by dabbling? Aren't you painting me and Mazurka? Or is this all a trick?"

"Well, I haven't been doing very much serious painting," Boris admitted, "the monumental captured me. So I went in for architecture. It's more gratifying. I do a picture now and again in my spare time."

"But haven't you done some posters?" Peter asked. "I've seen your name in two or three magazines. They spoke of you as a very promising painter. I wonder why you didn't continue it."

"The fact is . . ." said Boris. But he cut himself short. "It's a long story, I'll tell you some time."

As they walked back to the cottage, Peter questioned Boris "Are you happy with Olga? Have you children?"

"No, we have no children."

"But they are expecting one," Kovalenko put in, feeling a little ignored after his hour of triumph as a painter's model. "They are expecting a beautiful baby with blue eyes. It's a boy. Strong little fists, and teeth like snow and he is hungry, oh, how he is hungry."

"How do you know?" Boris laughed.

"How do I know? Aren't I the child's grandfather? Do you think that I don't know what my own grandchild will be like? He will be fair, like me. When he grows old, he will have a moustache like mine. And when I die, I will give him my sword, that's what I shall do."

When the three men entered the cottage, the women were already up and the breakfast was laid out on the table. Olga had to steady herself a little when she saw her brother, but she felt instinctively that he was not an enemy. He had put his arm round Boris's shoulder as he approached her. "Olga," he said tenderly, "little Olga, a doctor now!"

"And you, Peter!" Olga impulsively threw her arms round her brother's neck. But at the same time she looked at Boris. "And you, Peter, a hero of the Soviet Union. It's wonderful."

"Why didn't you children keep in touch?" grumbled Kovalenko. "If you had, this meeting wouldn't have been so upsetting."

Maruska wept. She wept because she was happy. "If only little Mishka was here," she wailed, "I'd be so happy." And then she hurriedly brushed away her tears. "I've made some meat patties for you, Peter. The ones you used to like as a boy. Look, have one." She went to the oven and pulled out a tray full of meat piroshkies. Then, seizing one bravely, she transferred one from hand to hand to show how hot it was and, making Peter open his mouth, she thrust the whole little pie into it.

NINE

THAT evening Peter Kovalenko's return to his native village was celebrated in truly Ukrainian style. The collective farm band was decked in all its glory, sitting on a dais in a large assembly hall. The hall itself was festooned with banners and flags. The village artists had painted enormous white words on crimson proclaiming their devotion to their fatherland, their pride at her achievements and extolling her noble son.

The girls especially were in a flutter. They had put on their white embroidered cotton dresses, wreathed themselves with flowers, and when Peter entered they turned their eyes away from him modestly. One or two bolder than the rest threw flowers at him. Peter bowed uncomfortably, and stood to attention whilst the band played the Internationale.

"Food first," said Burenko, who stood at the head of the farm delegation. "And then we will give speeches." The idea was welcomed and very soon knives and forks were busily clattering over the chatter.

"Have you seen Comrade Stalin?" was the most frequent question. Peter said that he had met him only once, when he came to visit the military school of aviation to which he belonged. He answered a hundred questions about aeronautics, trying to make his answers as simple as possible.

The enthusiasm for flying which had seized Petrokovka was indescribable. The youngsters had made wooden models and gliders which they all brought to Peter for his appraisal. A number of young men had voted amongst themselves to form a glider club. There were urgent suggestions that Petrokovka should have a parachute jumping tower such as they had in Moscow. When Peter explained the difficulties to them, they said they would build one themselves. "Will you come and teach us how to jump?" asked one peasant girl. Her name was Yulia Lcbedenko.

"Weren't you two sweethearts?" Kovalenko said loudly, bent on creating some interest in himself. His hand had been shaken innumerable times and he had been praised for his son's prowess. He was not jealous but he wanted to say a few words.

"Why, yes," said an old peasant, "you two were sweet on each other. Peter was seven then and Yulia three."

"But now she is married and no making eyes to her," said Kovalenko. "There is her husband. He is a mechanic." Peter waved his hand to a broad-faced, good-humoured man who sat next to Yulia. The man felt he had to do something so he clapped, and very soon the whole table began clapping.

"What are they clapping for?" asked Kovalenko. "Because the couple are lawfully married or because you were sweethearts?"

"Give us a speech, Comrade Kovalenko," the table roared.

The old man rose.

"No, not you," they yelled. "Your son. You have been a hero. We are tired of your stories. Let's hear Peter. Peter!"

Kovalenko sat down, bitterly disappointed. "Fame, what is it?" he said. There was a merry twinkle in his eye.

Then Burenko got up. "As director of the collective farm of Petrokovka let me officially welcome you to our midst. We are happy and proud at the distinction which you have earned. We feel that an honour has been done to Petrokovka. Socialism, my friends, that's what it means. It means heroic deeds. This year our harvest must be better. We must send fewer tractors to the repair shops. Isn't that so, Pyotr Vasilivitch? Isn't that what Socialism means?"

"Yes," said Peter, "Socialism means all these things and more. I, too, want to congratulate you. To say that you have never been far from my heart. But the sky in which I live is so much like the Ukraine. It is broad and free and beautiful. Sometimes when I am flying at night, I choose a bright star and call it Petrokovka."

"The man is an artist," whispered Boris in astonishment to Olga. "He is a human being. I think I shall take up flying. Perhaps I'll paint better."

"Sssh," someone ordered him, "Go on, Petka."

"Well, I have run out of good ideas," Peter grinned, "but I am glad to see with what enthusiasm the young people of our village approach the science of aeronautics. Some of you when you have a chance to go to Kiev, go to the parachute towers there and learn to jump. The Red Air Force needs brave pilots. We must be ready to defend our fatherland. You have read yesterday's papers. In Germany, a new regime, hostile to our country, has come to power. There is a man called Hitler. He says that he will invade our land one day. He will tear from our country our rich Ukraine. That is why I am a pilot. That is why I design planes. We must be on the defensive, comrades. We must be ready. We must go without many beautiful things for that end. We must beware of those who tell us that we can sit back and enjoy the fruit of our labour. We have only just begun. I have seen Petrokovka grow from a village with two hundred souls to a community of more than two thousand. Next year there will be many more people here, there will be many more buildings, many more tractors. You who feed the workers and the soldiers of our glorious Red Army, you can be proud of your task, for you, too, are soldiers, fighting in the fields and the meadows, wringing the riches out of the earth, giving us bread to sustain us. Peasants of the Ukraine, I give you a toast: to the armed forces of the Soviet Union, to our Comrade Stalin, to the old soldiers of the Revolution, to the new ones of the future."

The great assembly rose on its feet and sang the Internationale, followed by the Song of the Fatherland. Their clear healthy voices filled the hall with moving music. "And now," said Burenko, "we shall dance."

He ran with the speed of a hedgehog to where Olga was sitting. "May I have the pleasure?" he asked.

"Certainly, Comrade Burenko. Nothing would please me more."

The orchestra started to play a Viennese waltz. The young men and women paired off. The old ones pushed back the tables and engaged in conversation.

"You dance like a wheatstalk in the wind," said Burenko. "Oh, how gay, how happy I feel. What a brother you have, Comrade Kovalenko. We are so proud of him. The collective farm wants to give him a present. What do you think he would like?"

They twirled into the centre of the floor. Peter was dancing with his mother, whose enormous bulk turned with difficulty but who refused to give up the pleasure of dancing.

The old man Kovalenko was busily expostulating with Boris, striking heroic postures obviously showing how he wanted to be painted in the future.

"You know, I have many presents at home," said Burenko slyly. "We have bought a beautiful watch," and then he added. "And I have something for you. Some fine old lace. Do you like lace, comrade?"

"Why, yes, if it's beautiful. Where did you get it from?" she asked cautiously.

"Aha, it was left to me by a merchant. Pre-revolutionary stuff. Looks like gossamer and so cunningly woven. Won't you help me to choose a present for your brother?"

"I'd love to," Olga replied nonchalantly.

"Then come to-night. I'll show you all the beautiful things I have. Will you come? Promise now."

"Of course I'll come," said Olga gaily. The dance had stopped. "I'll come to see you to-morrow morning."

"Oh no, to-night, to-night," Burenko pleaded, "the night is such a lovely night to choose presents."

Olga's heart began to beat fast. She looked at the fat face of Burenko and his small greedy eyes, so much like a pig, she thought. He had been pressing her voluptuously against his body. The fat on him rolled and shivered as they danced. It was an unpleasant sensation.

"Make it twelve o'clock," he whispered. "You know my little house. Come alone. I have a little ring too, a little diamond ring. It sparkles like an ember."

"How childish this man is!" Olga thought. But she noticed that despite the squirming politeness, there was considerable confidence in Burenko's voice. There was authority and just a hint of danger.

He is up to something, she said to herself. All these watches and lace and little diamond rings. They are a bait, they are a trap. The sort of cheap trap that a man like Burenko would set.

"What were you before you were a doctor?" was Burenko's final remark as he took Olga back to where the family group stood.

Olga did not have time to answer. Her father, irritated at being left out of the dancing, suddenly shouted. "You don't call this dancing, do you? What are you hopping about for like fleas? Come, strike up a kapak! Dance, you peasants." They began clapping their hands.

The music blared out with a peasant dance and then, abandoning the languid postures of the waltz, the whole company broke into their native dance.

Kovalenko tripped about nimbly trying hard to bend down, but his gammy leg pulled him up sternly. He cursed it under his breath but went tapping on the floor, seizing a girl here and there by the waist and twisting her round savagely. "Makes the blood warm, doesn't it? Dance, hei, hei, hei, heipapapai." He clapped his hands savagely. "That's the way. Dance till your heels hurt, that's the way!"

TEN

THE dancing was over by eleven-thirty and the crowd, after many cheers, began to break up and go home, scolded fiercely by Kovalenko. "Get home, you grasshoppers. To-morrow you have got work in the fields. Even if he is a hero of the Soviet Union, you've got no right to ignore your work. Get home, you shilly shallies."

Merrily he slapped the youngsters on their bottoms. "Oh, how good young flesh feels. Some of their bottoms are good enough for roasting."

"Father is a cannibal," said Olga to her husband. "Why haven't you been dancing, Boris?"

"I've been talking with Peter most of the time."

"About us?" she queried.

"Yes."

"About?"

"Yes, that also."

"What does he say?"

"He thinks that since we haven't told Father, it's best to say nothing."

"That's what I think," Olga replied.

They all went home and prepared to go to bed.

Peter was in a particularly jovial mood. "It's good to meet you both again," he said earnestly. "I've been very lonely at times. I think that's why I took up flying. Now I'll stay more on the ground. You will come and see me in Moscow, won't you, Olga? And you, Boris?"

They promised they would.

The cottage quietened down. Kovalenko and his wife slept in one room, Boris and Olga in the other. Peter had made himself comfortable in the small attic which had been his brother Mishka's apartment.

They had barely settled down for the night when a loud knocking was heard on the door. Boris got up. He heard a small voice asking to be let in. He opened the door and found a little boy of about eleven shivering in the darkness. "What is it, youngster?" he asked.

"I've been asked," lisped the boy, "to bring the doctor to Comrade Burenko. He has been taken ill."

"What the devil," said Boris irritably. "Olga," he called, "your Burenko has a belly-ache."

Olga shivered apprehensively. "Why doesn't he send for the clinic doctor?" she asked. "He is only a few houses down."

"I've been there," said the boy, "but they say he has gone to Kiev and won't be back until to-morrow. And Comrade Burenko is lying on his stomach saying that he has cancer or something."

"Does he do that often?" asked Boris.

"No," answered the child; "but he is usually ill after a party."

Olga dressed hurriedly and came out, carrying the indispensable little bag of instruments. "I'd better go and look at him," she said to Boris. "Don't worry, darling, I will be back in a moment. It's probably nothing more than a dose of indigestion. A dose of bicarbonate, and if he shouts too much I'll prick some morphia into him. It may be appendicitis, of course. That will be a to-do. How far is the nearest hospital?"

"There is one at Peregaslav. Twenty wersts from here," said the boy. "I know; I had my tonsils taken out there."

"I see, that's not too bad," said Olga.

"I'll come with you," said Boris, "in case there is anything serious."

"Oh no, don't bother," Olga replied. "Anyway, Burenko has got a 'phone in his office and I can call for an ambulance if it is anything serious."

Boris shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he said, "but be quick, Olga. And don't be too kind to him."

Olga laughed. "Don't worry, I shan't."

The child showed her the way in the darkness and as soon as they had reached the porch of Burenko's cottage, disappeared. Olga tightened her grip on her instrument bag and pushed the door open.

A fantastic sight greeted her eyes. On a table laden with various clothes, stood two enormous candles. They burned softly. A bottle of wine and two glasses as well as a number of platefuls of dainties stood by the candlesticks. Burenko rose immediately Olga entered. There was no sign of appendicitis or indigestion on his face. Quite on the contrary, he smiled suavely and bowed in a solemn manner. "Forgive me, Comrade," he said, "bringing you out so late. But I thought I would give you an excuse."

"Are you ill or aren't you?" asked Olga brusquely.

"Why, yes," said Burenko with a sly smile. "Very ill," he tapped his heart. "Here."

"A couple of bromide tablets will put that right," said Olga cynically.

"Oh come, Olga," Burenko made eyes. "Really, you mustn't treat me like that," he advanced towards her and before Olga knew what was happening, he put his arm round her waist.

"Look, Burenko," she said, disentangling herself, "if you think you can win me by these masculine manners, you are mad. I am a doctor. I know just how many ounces of muck you are made of, and from looking at you I should say it's mucky muck. The rest of you is air," she gave him a shove on the chest and sent him reeling back.

"You are a tiger, Olutchka," said the irrepressible Burenko.

"You are a donkey," Olga said more kindly. The situation seemed preposterous to her. "Now, what are all these fine things laid out for? Are you going to have a wedding?"

"They are yours," said Burenko carelessly. "I have saved them up from my salary."

"You have hidden them away under your floor-boards more likely. This lace, this silk. Why, it smells as if it is more than twenty years old. And this sweetmeat, this candle-light, phew! What a disgusting scent there is in this room."

"Don't you like it?" said Burenko. "You know, I have never been able to get you out of my mind since you were a little girl."

"I left the village when I was fifteen," said Olga, "did I really captivate your heart as early as that, Comrade Director?"

"Yes," said Burenko, "it was to-night. When I saw you coming in. I felt your warm womanly body pressed against me. I felt faint with delirium. I love you, Olga, I love you, I love you, I love you."

"Take a draught of water three times a day," Olga prescribed mockingly. "What do you expect me to do? Throw my arms around

you and say that I love you, I love you, I love you? You round, greasy, little kulak."

"How dare you say that!" said Burenko, offended only mildly. "I am no kulak. Your father proposed me as director. Surely he ought to know. I am a simple working man. I am no seducer, Olga, do not think I am that." He lifted his hand up righteously. "I offer you honourable marriage."

"You do. Well, now think of that. What do you expect me to say? That I am deeply flattered? That I am indebted to you? Or do you want me to blush?"

"I expect you to be sensible," Burenko protested. "A man in love is a dangerous man. You wouldn't think I was a dangerous man, would you, Olga Vassilyeva?"

"I don't very much care to think about you at all, Comrade Burenko. I was called out here on a purely charitable mission, to cure you of a stomach-ache."

"How prosaic you are! Do you really mean to tell me that you fell for that trap? It was set for your artist husband, not for you. This is for you." Fumbling frantically in his coat, he produced a small jeweller's case and then, clicking it deftly open with one hand as if it was a lighter, he showed Olga an enormous stone. "Look how softly the candle-light shines on it," he tempted. "Olga, Olutchka, one kiss, one small tiny kiss from your beautiful mouth and it is yours."

"Oh, but you are forgetting the lace, Comrade Burenko, and the silks and the sweetmeats. How many kisses does that cost?"

"One peep at your beautiful breasts," said Burenko boyishly.

Olga laughed. "You are ridiculous. Do you think I haven't seen these things before?"

"Oh, I am sure you have, oh, I am quite sure you have, Olga."

"Do you take me for a whore?"

"I take you for what you are, charming lady." And then, between his teeth, screwing his eyes up still further, he muttered: "Why not? Why not take you for a whore? What were you doing in that euphemistically named Curative Labour Prophylactorium if you weren't a . . ."

"So," said Olga, "amongst your many accomplishments, listening to other people's conversations is one."

"You shouldn't talk so loudly," said Burenko triumphantly; "but now that you have, well, what shall we say? One night with me and we forget all the nights you have had with others."

Olga, in a sudden fit of fury, lifted up her instrument bag and, swinging it with full force, hit Burenko over the head. Burenko sank like a stone on the ground. A deep gash opened like a flower on his face.

"He bleeds like a stuck pig," said Olga, kneeling down. She inspected the damage she had done.

Burenko was groaning, half-conscious. The wound was not a serious one, not as serious as Olga had hoped. He opened his eyes weakly and said: "If I die, Olga, if I die, I die of love."

"You won't die," Olga replied, covering the small gash with a piece

of cotton wool and sticking an enormous plaster deliberately round his head. "You won't die of love or anything else. Your kind live to do mischief."

Burenko seized her by the hand. "I don't mind you hitting me," he said, "that's almost a pleasure. After all, you did show some kind of passion for me. And there is my blood on your fingers. We have mingled, Olga Vassilyeva, we have mingled."

"I don't know whether you are a lunatic," Olga replied sternly, "a dramatic nymphomaniac or a fat licentious beast. But, whichever you are, you are rather pathetic. Get up on your feet."

"Oh, pain, pain," wailed Burenko, seizing his head between his hands, "delirious, exquisite, deep pain. Is it because I am ugly that you cannot bring yourself to love me, Olga? Here, take the ring. Take the ring as a memento of a man you wounded. Of a proud man, I might say. Of a man who has known all the gamut of emotion. I have loved beautiful women, Olga; I need not be ashamed of it. As beautiful as you. Lionesses, creatures with limbs of steel, soft peasant girls as melting as butter, delicate French women that you bite like chicken off a bone, gipsies who nibble you, dreamers, enchantresses, Cleopatras, but never, never, Olga Vassilyeva, has my face been torn open, have I had to face danger for my love before!" Burenko pretended to swoon.

But seeing that none of these antics moved Olga in the slightest, he fell on his knees before her. "You are my sun," he shouted, "my ray of light. I shall not let you go without a struggle. You can cut me to pieces, there in the drawer is a carving-knife. Cut off my fingers, my ears, stab me in a thousand places, but I am yours, Olga, yours."

"Go to bed," Olga said quietly.

Seeing that this final appeal had no effect on the doctor, he tried his last card again. He re-used it like an old cheat. "But what if I tell your father of the Prophylactorium? Your brother, the whole village? What will they say? Think of the shame. Think of your poor father's grey beard. It will kill him. Do you wish me to be the murderer of your own father, Olga? How can I do that! He is a loved and trusted man amongst us. I cannot bring myself to commit murder even for your sake. Sleep with me, Olga, sleeeeeeep with me! I am a lover that you will never regret. I have lain silken sheets on the bed. There, look," he pulled back an enormous feather eider-down and revealed a pair of rather faded lemon-coloured silk sheets. "Look, I have put roses under the pillow. Have you no imagination, Olga Kovalenko? What do you know of love? I suppose you call it chemistry. Pooh, chemistry indeed. Can you put it under a microscope? Why are you afraid of me? I am a man, a man," he roared. "Look at my muscles, look at these thighs," he slapped his legs furiously, "I am a being on fire."

"Oh, call for the fire brigade," said Olga, "Now, listen, Burenko, if I hear any more nonsense, I shall kill you." She wanted to make him afraid. She opened her bag. "You see this syringe? One jab with this and you go to sleep for ever."

"Take me in your arms and jab me! Do what you like with me. Let them find a small ash in the morning and say 'This was Comrade Burenko, director of the collective farm of Petrokovka.' I do not care. But let my hungry lips drink. Let me sip at least your alms. He approached her again, but Olga raised the instrument case menacingly.

"This time," she said, "I'll split you open from head to tail. You want to look like a water-melon to-morrow morning?"

Burenko retreated before her scorn. Frantically he swept the gaudy finery from the table, but not before he had carefully put the ring into his pocket. "The truth is," he said simply, "this stone is false. A woman like you cannot be cheated so easily. But look at this one! Just look at this one." He produced another gem the size of a pigeon's egg. It was a topaz of sorts, and perhaps one of the many semi-precious stones which they mine in Siberia. "This is fit for a queen," he said lovingly. "Come to me or I shall set the whole farm on fire. Look!"

Olga had ceased to be amused by his antics. "I shall go and wake my father and my brother. They'll tie you up like a chicken on your precious silken bed. Will you keep quiet?"

"No," moaned Burenko, "no. Quietness is death to me. I must speak, I must sing," and he began singing in a quivering drunken voice.

The fact is, he was drunk, hopelessly drunk.

Olga moved towards the door. But Burenko, with an astonishing speed for his size, ran and slammed it. He then opened his mouth as if pretending to swallow the key and playfully dropped it into his vest. "You are a prisoner," he announced. "If you won't sleep with me, will you do another thing for me?"

"What is it?" asked Olga wearily.

"Will you get your brother to sponsor my membership to the Communist Party?"

"Now, Burenko," said Olga honestly, "you are not a bad fellow. You have had too much to drink. But how do you think I could persuade my brother to sponsor you? You will be admitted to the Party as soon as they are ready for you."

"Well then, Olga, I have nothing to do but to announce to the village of Petrokovka that its esteemed lady doctor is a . . ."

"Do what you like," Olga replied, "that doesn't concern me. You don't seem to realize that society has changed. That we no longer care for these things. A name is a name. But a person remains a person. I have worked hard to become a doctor. Nothing you can dig out of the past can take away my usefulness. Do what you please. Now give me the key!"

Burenko shook his head. There was a knock at the door. "Psh!" he said, putting his finger to his mouth. "Hide, it's probably the priest."

Olga did not hide. Burenko went to the door and opened it ajar, but two hefty shoulders barged the door open. Peter and Boris stood on the threshold looking at the scene of desolation, and at Olga calmly smoothing her hair. "What's been going on here?" Boris demanded.

ELEVEN

BURENKO, in order to retrieve the situation, began groaning. "I am so sick, Comrade Mishkin, so sick. And I have had nightmares. I think I must have overeaten and danced too much. For a man of my size I tend to overdo things."

"The fact is," said Olga openly, "Burenko called me here to make a proposal." Peter and Boris exchanged glances.

"What sort of proposal?" asked Peter.

"Oh, it was an honourable one," laughed Olga. "First he loved my body, then my soul, and then the Communist Party. It was a little piece of blackmail, wasn't it, Comrade Burenko?"

"Oh, no, you are making a mistake. Nothing of the sort. I merely wanted your good offices. You are very intelligent, Olga Vassilyeva. I respect you for that."

"And to-morrow morning," said Olga loudly, "because I refused what he calls my good offices, he is going to announce to the village of Petrokovka, my two and a half years' stay in the Prophylactorium in Moscow. Terrible, isn't it?"

"You are a rat," said Boris emphatically. "And I have a good mind to lambast you."

"I have done that already," Olga explained.

"Yes," said Burenko, "she has done that already." He pointed to his plastered head. "There is no need to lambast me. I am a little cunning, that is all. How is a man to get along without cunning?"

They left Burenko wringing his hands and trying to explain that he meant no harm. When they returned to the cottage they found Maruska and Olga's father up, waiting for them with some tea. "Boris told us you were called away, Olga," Kovalenko said, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. "Was it a serious case?"

"Oh, it's nothing," said Peter a little shortly. "Burenko is up to his tricks."

"So," said Kovalenko fiercely, "what tricks?"

Olga explained calmly: "He wanted to make some idiotic proposals to me. It's nothing to get upset about."

"Nothing to get upset about," Kovalenko roared. "What right has he to make proposals to my married daughter? You call that nothing?" He walked menacingly over to the wall where his sword hung. "I shall go and cut him down. I'll slice him up like the fat ham that he is."

"Now, Father, stop this nonsense," Peter ordered sternly, "and get back to bed. But I warn you, keep a good eye on Comrade Burenko."

"Don't worry, I shall," said Kovalenko solemnly, more mollified. "But, Olga, who is going to revenge the insult?"

"There is no insult, Father; Burenko was drunk. He overheard Boris and me speaking in the barn and obviously tried to make capital out of it."

Boris coughed warningly.

"No, Boris," Olga continued, "I think it is best to be honest. You see, Father and Mother, I was in a Prophylactorium before I became a doctor."

"What's that?" asked Maruska. "Sounds like a theatre to me."

"It was an institute to recover destitute women," Peter explained.

"Boris found me on the streets. That's a simple explanation," Olga said.

"Oh, Olga!" Kovalenko gasped. "Olga, why did you do that?"

"Because I didn't have a roof over my head and I was hungry."

"But why didn't you come down to Petrokovka?"

"Why?" answered Olga. "Because you were starving in Petrokovka. That's why. Did you want to have another mouth to feed?"

"Olga is right," said her mother quietly; "those were hard times. Don't let us be hard on the girl."

"I might tell you," Peter broke in, "there is no shame in having been in a Prophylactorium. But the old peasants here would talk if Burenko told them, so Olga has thought it better to tell you before Burenko starts talking."

"I shall split him like a hare," said Kovalenko fiercely, "if he dares to speak of Olga disrespectfully. She is a doctor, isn't she? She has worked hard for that. Our new Soviet State has no room for the old morality. Am I right?"

"Where did you read that?" said Peter kindly. "But it's true, Father, that's what it is. It's true."

The next morning the collective farmers of Petrokovka were astonished to see Kovalenko going about with his sword. Burenko was a figure of politeness. He bowed and scraped and made feeble little jokes. But he did not mention the Prophylactorium. On the contrary, he raved about the treatment that Olga Vassileva had given him.

TWELVE

WHEN Heine's works were being burned in Germany, when Mendelssohn's music was condemned to silence and Einstein driven out, Hitler brought out the torments of the Middle Ages, torture, the ghetto and the yellow spot. It seemed as if, apart from the Western democracies, there was no place upon the earth the Jews could call a home.

Civilized men of all creeds and races were ashamed for the human race, for Germany, when they heard how many thousands were murdered and starved, how human beings were used as 'guinea-pigs' in Hitler's poison-gas tests. But the shadow of the twisted cross fell upon Italy, Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria. Those countries forgot the dictum of the man Hitler pretends to emulate. Did not Napoleon say that the degree of civilization a nation possesses may be judged from her treatment of the Jews?

Palestine was a divided heritage. Yet there was a spot a Jew could call a home. True, he was a Russian Jew, and international

turmoil prevented an unrestricted immigration. But in the Far East upon the banks of the Bijan and Bira, by the shore of the great Amur river, a region had been set aside for Jewish colonization in 1928.

It was no land of Canaan to the immediate view, this ninety million acres plot of earth. Rather it was a land of promise. Its soil and vast forest were virgin. Perhaps no Jew had set his foot on it before. But there was an abundance of milk and honey. The problem was to find it.

So the story of Birobidjan, however different from the epic growth of the American Middle West and the prairie cities of Canada, had this in common: by the sweat of their brow men did eat. In an area twice the size of Palestine, seven thousand Jewish collective farmers cut away the brush wood and the forest and cultivation began on a space of about two million acres.

By the end of the first Five-Year Plan in 1934 a territory once dotted with small islets of civilization—'railway station' and trapper station civilization at that—became the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidjan, with a population of fifty thousand and a number of flourishing townships.

Obstacles there were, enough to daunt the sturdiest pioneer. But the Jews that settled in Birobidjan came to disprove the theory that a Jew cannot work behind a plough. The surplus tinkers and tailors grew lumberman's muscles, and fought with axe and tractor against marsh, floods, and the absence of roads, working for five hard years in a silent, heavily forested land.

The wood of the country was particularly magnificent, especially the tall Manchurian ash, which rises to one hundred and fifteen feet and is sometimes over three feet in diameter. Swift rivers and brooks supply the better-known varieties of fresh-water fish, and the hunter finds rare furs like ermine and sable besides deer, wild boars, and gazelles, and even an occasional tiger.

In 1928, Birobidjan, the capital of the Autonomous Region, was nothing but a collection of wooden shacks built round a small railway station. In 1934 it had all the amenities of a modern town, with four-storied stone buildings, well-paved streets, cinemas, and a theatre, besides the usual educational facilities which include a higher technical institute. Libraries and sports clubs are much patronized.

The 'first-year' collective farmers are rightly proud of the city they built, but the Autonomous Region is not one vast collective farm. It is a civilization of its own cut in the Siberian wilds, and looks after itself with a power-station, clothing factory, a standard house building works as well as a furniture factory—which supplies not only Birobidjan but the whole of the Far East.

Scattered throughout the territory are four main tractor stations, each with large fleets of tractors, which help to cultivate and harvest fine crops of wheat, oats, buck-wheat, rice, and soya beans. The natural meadow lands are particularly suitable for horses and cattle.

The mineral wealth of Birobidjan is enormous. Not only is graphite and magnesite mined, but deposits of high-grade iron ore—

three billion tons of it—have been found near Birakan and Kimkan. Coal has also been located in great quantities, but geological expeditions sent out by the Academy of Sciences from Moscow are continually sending in reports of new mineral 'finds'.

There is a monument in Moscow which testifies to the wealth and beauty of Birobidjan. The beautiful pink, red, and green marble slabs used in decorating Moscow's Underground stations were brought in car-loads from Birobidjan's fine porphyry and marble quarries.

Second to Birobidjan in size is the town of Obluchye. Its situation in the vicinity of the Sutar goldfields gives it a growing importance. Birofeld is noted for its agricultural Research Institute. The best milkmaid on the collective farm there is Leah Lishnyansky. She is a member of the Soviet Parliament and was one of the first settlers in Birobidjan.

From Birakan a road leads at right angles deep into the interior of the country to Kuldur. Kuldur is called the Pearl of the Far East, and a touching story is told of how once a hunter shot a deer without killing it and followed its trail of blood on the snow to a beautiful valley closed in on all sides by mountains. He found the deer standing in a gushing stream letting the water wash over its wounded leg, and when he put his hand into the pool, he found it was hot.

So the beasts of the forests led men to a medicinal spring and here, on the spot, a large health resort sprang up. People from all parts of the Far East came to have their rheumatism and stomach troubles cured.

The rest of the Soviet Union has taken Birobidjan to its heart. It did more than watch and admire the efforts of the pioneers who went out and built a city and a home in the vast *taiga* of Siberia. In the difficult days of construction, the White Russian Republic gave its advice and practical help. Kharkov, the most important industrial city in the Ukraine, assisted Birobidjan with town-planning, whilst the huge Kirov Works in Leningrad watched with almost paternal care the development of the young industries of the region.

Into this virgin land came Mishka, the son of Kovalenko. He had been lent from the Ukraine to help this Jewish Republic develop its growing metallurgical industry. When he returned to Petrokovka, in 1937, he brought with him a young Jewish girl as wife, twenty years after the Revolution, when the age-long prejudice against the Jews had died.

Kovalenko would tell his son about the terrible pogroms which the Tsarist Government had initiated against the Jews. "Now," he used to say proudly, "we recognize our hundred and eighty-nine different nationalities as children of one mother,"

THIRTEEN

THE Soviet Union weathered the economic crisis which hit the world in 1929. The thirties, plagued with political and economic dissensions, did not affect her enormous industrial progress. The heavy industries

were the sinews of war and although the Russian people had to sacrifice much in order to have guns, they had more butter than Germany.

It was this enormous progress which scared Nazi Germany most, and the secret bureau of Colonel Nicholai in Berlin worked overtime to send agents and saboteurs to hamper the wealth of Russian industry. They employed not only the most obvious agents but exploited the slightest discontent, the slightest philosophic deviation, the smallest disagreement, and so inevitably the partisans of the exiled Trotsky—willingly or unwillingly—became the spearhead of Hitler's internal attack on the Soviet Union.

Flung against this enormous canvas were the intrigues of the generals, men like Tukachevsky and Putna. Military opportunists and dreamers, who sought to emulate Napoleon in an 18th day of Brumieres. Their story can now be told.

On the way from London, after representing Russia at the coronation of King George VI, they stopped in Paris. They planned more than a palace revolution. Their object was to play the role of General Monk. In order to secure the support of every dissident Russian in Europe, they approached the head of the White Russian organization in Paris, General Miller. Plans were prepared for insurrection. A number of agents, German and White Russian, were put under the protection of the treacherous marshals.

Then, one day, General Miller disappeared. He was kidnapped. The French Police searched for him everywhere. The mystery of his disappearance would never have been solved were it not for the fact that General Miller left a note on his bureau saying that he had gone to meet his Second-in-Command, a certain General Skoblin, at the corner of Rue — “If I don't return, you will know where to make inquiries.”

Miller did not return. General Skoblin was questioned by the police but professed complete ignorance. When confronted with the note, he admitted that he had seen him that afternoon, but that Miller had left in the company of some other man. Whilst police investigations were on foot, General Skoblin also disappeared without trace.

This White General Second-in-Command of the White Officers' Organization in Paris, was a Soviet agent. His revelations sent Tukachevsky and Putna, besides a host of other treacherous officers, to a lime-filled grave.

FOURTEEN

THE hunt for the traitors began in Russia. They were mercilessly ferreted out and destroyed. The rest of the world wailed that the Soviet Union was shooting its best officers. Consequently, its military might was nothing but putty. The Angel of Death swept over not only the armed forces but the industries, transport. Even cultural institutions were not spared. The Revolution was determined not to perish from within.

Amongst the humbler fry who were put on trial for their lives were Perchavin and Gubsky, Boris's two friends. And, consequently, Boris himself did not escape a severe police investigation. Olga, too, was questioned.

"But why, why?" Boris kept on saying to his wife, "should they choose us? What have we done? I may have said a few kind words about Trotsky. After all, he did do something for the Revolution, but to suggest that I am a wrecker, that I am a saboteur, that's nonsense."

Olga accepted the situation more philosophically. "We are spring-cleaning," she said; "the Germans have riddled our country with agents. Those that live, as we have, under martial law, must realize that the slightest suspicion has to be investigated. Do understand that, Boris, and be patient!"

But Boris refused to understand anything. He grew more and more despondent. He wrote desperate letters to Peter Kovalenko in the hope that his high standing in the Party would help him. But Peter's only reply was: "If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear. War is coming to us. We must be ready. We must know our friends and our enemies."

But old Kovalenko did more than write. He came up to Moscow with his sword. He went to the police bureau and showed them his bright sword with which he had fought the enemies of the Revolution. "Do you think that my daughter and my son-in-law are bandits?" he asked them arrogantly.

Respect was shown to the elder man, but the investigations continued for many months. Perchavin and Gubsky were released. There was no concrete evidence against them of any active work against the State.

Suddenly, at the beginning of 1939, the purge was called off and the scare of suspicion began to heal quickly. For a whole year Boris and Olga had lived in dreadful apprehension. They had tried by their hard work to show their loyalty to the authorities and they succeeded. Olga had qualified as a parachutist and frequently took trips to the inaccessible northern parts of the country where she tended the sick.

Boris's position, too, had improved. He began to study camouflage and was taken into the reserves of the Red Army. The war clouds over Europe grew thicker as every month passed. Czechoslovakia had been occupied. Munich had been thrown as an insult into the Soviet Union's face. The European drama began with the signing of the Russo-German pact.

Kovalenko, in the village of Petrokovka, laughed loudly: "Peace with the Germans!" he said, "with the Nemtsy! It is time for me to sharpen my old sword. How long will it last? A month? A year?"

BOOK FOUR

WE SHALL RETURN

ONE

THE German Wehrmacht moved over the frontier to attack the Soviet Union on 22nd June. The Kreuzritters of the twentieth century had returned. They had forgotten the lesson of Lake Peipus, the battle of 1242, almost exactly five hundred years previously. They were tempting the cycles of history and were leaving themselves but one year for history to repeat itself.

The Russian people, like the German people, had passed through all the crucibles of time. There was no Tsar to lead them to their destiny on that day of 22nd June. They, the people, were fighting for their lives and their positions. Yet there was more than just this simple animal fact, this struggle between a lion and a leopard. The machines that had taken time to build, the systems which had been created, the clash of enormous forces—all these but nothing if not the herald of the age of chaos. The loud voice of war could not hide the louder and more insistent clamour that had run round the world pleading for sanity, for better conditions, for the abolition of poverty, for the abolishment of exploitation. Whether it be in the name of Christ, in the name of social idealism or Communism, these forces were the progressive forces and, late as the sun stood in the sky, these would surely unite for their own salvation.

TWO

THE village of Petrokovka received the news of the German attack with tremendous excitement. In the house of Vassya Kovalenko an argument ensued over the lunch-table. Maruska had burned the meat and cooked the potatoes badly.

"Maruska, there is no need to spoil our lunch just because the Germans have put their snouts into our garden," Kovalenko protested.

"Oh, I have been listening to the wireless all the morning and left little Shura to look after the meat. Comrade Molotov's statement took more than half an hour to read out. By the time I returned to the kitchen Shura was playing on the floor, and the meat—well, you can taste the meat."

Shura looked up with her blue bewildered eyes and smiled. She was Olga's child, and greatly resembled her mother, although in temperament she had much of Boris's thoughtful demeanour and could sit for hours not talking with anyone—but just thinking. Kovalenko thought this particularly unhealthy for a child of eight and would urge

her to ride ponies. But she evinced no love for horses. She liked patting them. That way all.

She was a delicate child and even when she went out into the fields she seemed more interested in picking flowers than in listening to Kovalenko's horticultural explanations. He, good man, had tried to teach her the problem of life from a barley stalk. Consequently he felt very modern and up-to-date. But all that little Shura had learned was to look at people rather quizzically and to wonder whether each male and female had a little barley plant inside of them which miraculously grew up into a baby.

As soon as the little altercation between Kovalenko and his wife had finished, he hurried to the village hall where a meeting had been called by the director of the collective farm, Burenko. "The beasts have attacked our land," he was saying, looking carefully at the heading of the *Pravda*, and quoting copiously from the editorial. "They have violated all international obligations. They have attacked us with no declaration of war. The mighty people of the Soviet Union, united behind Comrade Stalin, will carry this war of liberation and achieve the dearest hope of all mankind, peace, peace," he repeated.

"Here, give me the *Pravda*," said Kovalenko roughly, "we can all read. The thing is, what are we going to do?"

That's what the villagers had come to the meeting for. They had come to discover what to do. There was Pavel here—the head of the tractor station—and his brigade composed of twelve middle-aged men. The youngsters were already on their way to join the Red Army. There were about three hundred collective farmers present in the hall. Peter Otrupoff, regarded as the village comic, was slowly melting before their eyes into a tragedian. "We shall not let this go unpunished," he said.

"Oh shut up!" said Kovalenko. "Why can't you people say what you think instead of cribbing it from the newspapers? You want victory. Well, organize for victory. That's what you must do."

"Comrade Kovalenko," Burenko protested, "I insist that you talk with more politeness. -You are not a general on a field of battle. There is no need to shout, we are not deaf. And if you have any suggestions to make, put them up to the Chairman. I am the Chairman."

"Listen, Comrade Burenko," shouted the old man still louder, "we are not here to listen to pretty speeches. We are here to work. A whole hour has been wasted. The harvest will soon be ripe to gather. The people need food. So we will gather the harvest. We have sent our sons to the front and we must concern ourselves with our collective farms."

"Have you heard," said one of the collective farmers, "that the Germans have broken into Latvia?"

"The Rumanians have joined them," said Petka. "They claim to have crossed the River Pruth."

"The Germans are before Lemberg."

"Why doesn't the Red Army push them out?"

"I am not a military strategist," said Burenko; "ask him." He

pointed to the old warrior. "Well, since you are so clever, tell us. Why are the Germans pushing in so fast?"

"Because I am not out there to stop them," said Kovalenko.

The hall roared with laughter.

"You think that's funny, don't you? Well, it's just as funny as your asking me such a question. How the devil do I know? Do I know what plans have been made? But I know this, that an army that attacks first has the initial advantage. But it's no good us standing round here and gabbling. As I say, the harvest will be ready in another two weeks. What are we doing to prepare for it? Let's leave it to the Red Army to fight the Germans. We have our home front on which to fight."

"And what if the Germans come here?" asked Burenko.

"They will find the harvest gathered," Kovalenko snapped back.

"But what about our land?" said one of the peasants.

"The Germans will pay dearly for it. What are you worrying about your land for? They cannot take it away. They can't put the black earth in their pockets and carry the Ukraine away to Berlin, can they?"

"Yes, but we have built houses," shouted Burenko; "we have built a new life, barns, tractor stations. We don't want these to be destroyed."

"Leave it to the Red Army," said Kovalenko; "they are fighting out there to save your precious barns and houses. But, tell me, to whom do these barns and tractors belong?"

"To us," said Burenko.

"And who are you?"

"Who are we!" Burenko shouted. "Are you playing the fool? We are people."

"But what people?" Kovalenko demanded remorselessly.

"Soviet people," Petka supplied the answer.

"Very well then," Kovalenko replied, "then the barns and the tractors belong to the Soviet people. You are only a part of them. An insignificant part, I might say." He spat on the floor to show his contempt. That brightened him. "But you are a fine people. No one is saying you are not. Don't get that into your heads. Only you are being led astray by this fool," he pointed to Burenko.

"How dare you say that? I shall report you to the Agricultural Committee. I demand my right."

"My right is to call you a fool if I think you are a fool. That's what I fought for in the Revolution, to be able to call a man a fool if he is a fool. Pah," he turned to the peasants. "The Soviet people gave you this land. Guard it with all your might. But if it falls, you will fall with it. And when the day comes and victory is ours again, this land will be returned to you. This land with all its barns and tractors. Now do you understand?"

"Yes," cried the collective farmers, "we understand. Hurrah for Kovalenko!"

Then, with a wave of his hand, as if he was leading a cavalry charge, Kovalenko shouted: "To work!"

Three hundred men and women streamed out of the hall and streamed into the fields, into the tractor stations, into the barns and began to work. Only now and again they raised their heads to the aeroplanes that were flying across the broad Ukrainian steppe.

THREE

OLGA and Boris were deeply concerned about their eight-year-old Shura. They had sent her to Petrokovka two weeks before the war had broken out. The onward sweep of the German army had brought them into the Ukraine, and although there were many more miles to go before Petrokovka itself was reached, they felt it would be better to evacuate her to some friends who lived in Kuibishev.

"Of course, there is no earthly reason for us to get panicky," said Boris reassuringly. "The advance will soon be stemmed. Petrokovka is nearly as far from the frontier as Moscow. The Germans won't see the Dnieper, I promise you."

But Olga wasn't much reassured. "You know very well what Father is like. He is completely oblivious to danger. He will keep the child there until shells are falling on their heads. Then he will pack the child on a horse and send her galloping to Moscow. I can't trust him. I think, Boris, that you ought to go down and fetch her."

"I go down!" said Boris. "But aren't you her mother? Why should I go down?"

"I suppose because you are her father. And another thing," Olga was slightly irritated and pitched her voice high. "I am trying hard to get permission to go to the Front."

"Oh, you are, are you? That's the first I've heard of it. What is all this, Olga? Don't you feel you are being heroic enough?"

"You are an inhuman idiot," said Olga, a little more quietly. "Someone has to go to the Front. It might as well be I."

"And it might as well not be you. When they need you at the Front they'll call for you. You seem to volunteer every given moment. You've got a sort of volunteeritis."

"You are growing old," said Olga.

"Oh no, I am not," Boris protested; "not at all. But when some wretched Samoyedes were stranded on some Arctic ice floe, who should volunteer to go out to rescue them, to treat their wounds, but Olga Mishkin? Where there is a prairie fire, who jumps out of aeroplanes to help a trapped woman? Olga Mishkin. When there is an epidemic in the Pamirs, who volunteers? When there is any sort of trouble. When there is even a war that covers the world from end to end, who volunteers to put her silly face into it?"

"Olga Mishkin!" said his wife; "but you can't change me."

"You just can't sit in Moscow when anything enormous, world-

shaking, terrific, overpowering—aren't those your excuses?—is taking place."

"No, I can't," said Olga. "In any case, I am organizing . . ."

"Ooooh, when you are not hoofing around on ice floes or jumping into fires with parachutes, then you are organizing something. Well, what are you organizing?"

"I am organizing a detachment of nurses. We are going to Smolensk in three days' time. I shall be a senior surgeon."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me that a week or two ago? Why must I always know when it's no use my protesting? Why do you always present me with *faits accomplis*? It's Hitlerian, that's what it is."

Olga loved her husband dearly. She loved him especially for his ineffectual, half-serious, half-comic protests. They had been the feature of their every-day life ever since Shura was born. Six months after her birth, Olga had already passed her proficiency test in parachute jumping. Since that day she had never looked back. She loved the air as a natural element.

She loved it perhaps more than Peter, her brother. He was interested in the air as an engineer. It was a medium for his experiments. Olga loved it as others love the sea or the mountains. It was a holiday resort for her, a place where she could recuperate, where she could be alone, where she could be above the earth in the spiritual sense as well as the physical.

"Then it is all arranged," said Olga. "You go down to fetch Shura."

"But I am doing a canvas!" said Boris.

"Doesn't your child mean more to you than a few daubs on a canvas?"

"Doesn't art mean anything to you? Olga! Just imagine how much Rembrandt could have painted if he had had a wife like you. A few daubs on a canvas. Look at this!"

Olga walked over to her husband's easel and turning her head a little on one side, gave it a critical survey. "It's very attractive," she said.

"Oh," gasped Boris, "attractive. What a word to use. Do you think this is a sugar-cake? Or a piece of feminine clothing? Attractive!"

"What I mean to say is that you are quite an empty person, Boris, who, by some queer trick of Nature, knows how to paint. The people's faces are there, I can even recognize their noses. But the nose doesn't smell, the ears don't listen."

"The nose doesn't smell, the ears don't listen. That's it, Olga. That's exactly what's the matter with my paintings. You are a genius. Very well, I'll go down and fetch Shura and, I promise you, I shall do a portrait of her. And then you tell me whether her nose doesn't smell and her little ears don't listen," he smiled happily to himself.

His wife, exhausted by a whole day's work in a hospital, threw off her tunic and went into the bathroom to wash.

FOUR

THE German drive into the Ukraine brought them perilously near to Petrokovka. They had already occupied Nikolaev and Bobrinetz. Kovalenko completely disregarded Burenko's orders, to wait for orders before doing anything; he set the village into motion.

"I haven't received orders to collect the grain two weeks ahead of schedule," complained Burenko. "I haven't received any orders at all. I shall complain to the Agricultural Committee. How dare you take things into your own hands? I am the director here."

"Listen, Burenko, the Germans are at our gates," Petka would advise him. "The Comrade Commander is right. We must gather the harvest, and cart it away behind our lines."

Kovalenko was always flattered whenever he was referred to as commander. He beamed magnificently on the speaker.

With his shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbows, Kovalenko had been learning how to work the mechanical reaper. Burenko had run by his side like a little dog, protesting that Kovalenko had no right to do the reaping. Viciously, Kovalenko would jab on the accelerator so as to make the enormous bulk of the collective farm director feel as heavy as a sack of stones.

"What is more," Kovalenko would say, "you are going to give orders for every barn to be burnt down. All the petrol that cannot be carted away must be blown up, preferably in the German faces. Not one grain of wheat must remain here."

"But what are we going to eat?"

"Don't ask me," said Kovalenko; "what's important is that the Germans have nothing to eat. If you have to starve with them, so much the better."

"But you are a madman, Comrade Commander," said Burenko, noping to win him over with the phrase that worked like magic.

"I am a madman," roared Kovalenko. He stepped fiercely on the accelerator and sent his reaping-machine whirling away to the farthest end of the field.

Suddenly, Burenko saw a number of collective farmers running towards him. "Comrade Stalin is speaking," said one old peasant woman. "Everybody has been asked to hear him."

"Good," said Burenko. "Well, let's go and hear him."

Kovalenko had disappeared over a small ridge and Burenko, in mean vengeance, pretended that there was no one working in the field. So Kovalenko missed Stalin's address.

When they reached the Assembly Hall they found the wireless had been turned on and was blaring with martial music. Very soon there was a hush and the strong steady voice of Stalin came over the air. "In the case of forced retreat by Red Army units, all rolling stock must be evacuated; the enemy must not be left a single engine, not a single railway car, not a single pound of grain or gallon of fuel. Collective farmers must drive off all their cattle and turn their grain to

the safe keeping of the State authorities for transportation to the rear. All valuable property—including non-ferrous metals, grain, and fuel—which cannot be withdrawn, must without fail be destroyed."

This statement was received with cheers. "Not one grain shall we leave for the barbarians," the peasants shouted. "The harvest is nearly gathered. What we cannot take away, we'll burn."

"But comrades, comrades," Burenko protested, "why burn these good things? Why not bury them? Hide them?"

"Yes, there is something in that," said one peasant. "We can bury some of the machines, too. The thrasher, for example, we can bury that."

"And the harrow," said another.

"We can even bury a little food," said Burenko. "After all, who knows we may have to come back. Or some of us won't be able to leave? We'll have to eat."

"What did Stalin say?" came the outraged voice of Kovalenko. He was standing in the door-post, a terrible old man. His sabre was in his hand. "What did Stalin say?" he demanded.

"He said all valuable property which cannot be withdrawn must, without fail, be destroyed."

"And destroyed it shall be. And those that don't obey that order, will be destroyed as well," roared Kovalenko.

"Comrade Kovalenko is quite right," Burenko put in. "Quite right. We shall all do as the comrade commander says. But who will give the orders? When are we going to have to destroy these things?"

"When I say so," said Kovalenko. "When I smell the smoke of gunpowder."

"But we want a sign," said Petka, "which we all can see. We cannot just depend on your sense of smell, comrade commander."

"The Red Army will give us plenty of warning. In the meantime, finish your harvest and form yourselves into parties ready to fire what remains of the crops, to burn down the barns and destroy what we cannot carry away."

"But who is going to remain when the Germans come here?" asked one of the peasants.

"Only those remain," said Kovalenko, "who want to remain. The others can retreat into the interior. The exodus begins to-night. Get all the horses saddled. See that the tractors are in good working order. The villages move out to-night."

"Is it as serious as that?" asked Burenko.

"Of course. We have two or three days at the most. A few must remain to finish the harvest. The rest must go across the Dnieper."

A few of the peasants began to sob. Others swore vengeance. "The Red Army will liberate us," Kovalenko promised; "have faith and do your duty."

FIVE

BORIS arrived at Petrokovka the very night when the village was being evacuated. Tractors chugged, horses neighed, huge droves of cattle passed through the village streets, many old women were weeping. Children cried from weariness. A stray dog or two barked.

Boris appeared in Kovalenko's hut as pale as a ghost. He seized his little girl to his breast, covered her with kisses. Kovalenko greeted him warmly. But he had little time for words. He had come in to snatch up his heavy sword.

"I am taking her back to-night," said Boris.

"You can't," his father-in-law answered. "The Germans have already cut the railway."

"But I was there only a few hours ago."

"A few hours are enough to cut a railway."

"Then I'll join the peasants."

"You would be baggage. They are evacuating precious grain and tractors."

"What do you mean, baggage?" asked Boris. "You think that Shura isn't worth a tractor? Well, she is to me."

"You will remain here until to-morrow. We'll get you out somehow, don't worry about that!"

"Now, you had better do as Father says," said Maruska softly. She took Shura from his hands and patted her.

"Yes," said Shura to her father, "you had better do what Grandfather says. He has been awfully angry these last few days." Boris kissed the child good-night.

"Listen," said Kovalenko, "don't stand there gaping. Come and lend me a hand."

"Willingly," answered Boris, throwing off his coat. The summer nights in the Ukraine are very hot. They walked out into a night brightly illuminated. Flares were burning around them.

"The harvest hasn't all been gathered in," Kovalenko told his son-in-law, "there is a whole field of corn and one of beet which we have to attend to."

"What do you mean, 'we'? I have never gathered beet before in my life."

"No one is asking you to gather anything. Can you drive a motor?"

"Well, yes, after a sort."

"Then you can drive a tractor." He pushed Boris over to where a couple of tractors stood and roughly outlined the controls. "Jump in!" he said. "All you have to do is to drive the tractor over the field over and over again so that it cuts up the beet very fine. I don't want to see one little beet left whole by to-morrow morning."

"Oh," groaned Boris, "and to think that I might be in Moscow painting a picture, or at least camouflaging something. I am not cut out for this work, you know, Papa."

"Nobody is cut out for any work," said Kovalenko. "I don't like it any more than you do. Besides, this field that I am going to plough up I have sown. It hurts. It's like killing your own baby. Those little ears of wheat, I've watched them grow. Don't you think it won't be hard for me. But you are a man, aren't you? You didn't sow that sugar-beet. Why should you care about cutting it to ribbons? Come on, hack it up! If one beet remains by to-morrow morning, I'll put it up your arse."

Disconsolately, Boris got up into the driver's seat and released the hand-brake. The machine shot off without control. But Boris soon regained his wits, especially when he saw Kovalenko charging down behind him. "Here," he shouted over to him, "this adjacent field. You do this one, and I do the other."

The two men rode into the darkness and whilst the village moved away, Kovalenko and Boris Mishkin obeyed Comrade Stalin's instructions to scorch the earth.

SIX

WHEN Boris and his father-in-law returned to the hut on the next morning, they were dropping with tiredness. They were very surprised to see Mishka, who had apparently ridden the whole night. He had important instructions to carry out, namely, to supervise the demolition of all collective farm property that could not be carted away.

Burenko was standing smugly with a cup of tea in his hand. He was discussing in amiable terms the evacuation of the village when Kovalenko turned up. As the old man pushed his way into the room, he grasped the cup that Burenko was holding and putting it to his mouth, drank it in one gulp. "I am that thirsty," he said. "Now, what's all this? Mishka, you here? Goodness me, Why does the whole family take it into their heads to come down just when we all ought to be leaving."

"The fact is, Father . . ." Mishka outlined his plans.

He was a little irritated when his father replied with loud laughter: "Why, we thought of all that long ago whilst you bureaucrats were scratching your heads; we arranged for the demolition parties, didn't we, Comrade Burenko?"

"Oh, yes," said Burenko, "we did. The parties are only waiting to hear the word."

"Well, that's fine," said Mishka. "We can begin right away. After we had done that, we can all pack into the car and move out. The Germans should be here in about ten hours. Leah, will you pack?"

Leah, Mishka's wife, took Shura by the hand and went into her small room to pack the child's clothes. Mishka stood looking at her for a long time. He was deeply in love with his wife. They had both wanted a child, but somehow one had not come. Now it was war and they would have to wait.

"All right," said Mishka, "let's go. I suggest we blow up the barns first. They would be excellent garages and shelters for the Germans. What about the hay?"

"Oh, everything is being attended to, everything. Isn't it, Comrade Commander?"

"Well, I have appointed the parties," Kovalenko growled. "They are waiting for the signal."

"Very well," said Mishka, "you give me the points where you placed your men and I'll make a tour to see that everything is ready. I've got a few boxes of dynamite in my car which may come in useful to blow up the Co-operative Hall."

"Fine. You can go and fetch them, Boris," Kovalenko ordered. "Stack them up here under the table."

"What about the school and the library?" asked Maruska. She, too, had been packing a few essentials.

"Oh, we'll blow up the school," said Mishka, "but let's leave the library, shall we? The Germans will be able to read a lot of books they haven't seen in Germany for the last seven years. All right, Comrade Burenko, are you ready?"

"Certainly; but I would like to go and pack a few of my belongings first. I'll tell you what. You go to the farthest point of the farm, up Eagle's Hill, and see whether the barns up there are being attended to. I've got to speak to a few men in the village. Besides, there are the farm records to pack up and get away."

"Oh, you had better burn those," said Kovalenko. "I've seen them. You could even leave them. They are such long-winded affairs, the Germans might think they are important."

"No," said Burenko, "the records are a precious account of what the collective farmers in Petrokovka have done. They are one of the most glorious annals in collective agriculture. I shall one day publish them together with my diary."

"All right," said Mishka, "I'll go off then. I'll make a tour and will be back in two or three hours. Get everything ready."

Petrokovka had heard the boom of German guns for the last week. Their intensity had increased with every hour. Planes had frequently flown over the village. There were a number of bomb craters in the street. The retreating Red Army men had skirted the village.

In an hour everything was ready. Leah and Maruska had managed to pack the family's clothes into two large bundles and had set them outside the door. The village was strangely silent. Burenko had gone to attend to his documents.

Boris stood outside at the gate, looking at the deserted panorama, creating a mind-picture. This would be a fine subject to paint, he said to himself. Now and again a few villagers would pass him. He asked them whether they knew how far the Germans were. "They are not far," was the only reply he obtained. "You had better be moving, comrade."

Suddenly he heard a tremendous commotion going on in the hut. He rushed in and found Maruska in tears. "He says he won't go,"

she wailed. "He says he wants to remain in the village and kill a few Germans. What are you going to do with an old fool like that?"

"I won't go. I said I won't go and I won't."

"There, listen to him," Maruska raised her hands to heaven. "Why don't you truss him up like a chicken, Boris? Why don't you tell the old fool that he has a duty towards me? Towards his family. Towards everyone that loves him!"

"My duty is to stay behind and kill some Germans," said the old man. "This war is my war. Just because I am too old to go into the Red Army, that doesn't mean I have forgotten how to be a soldier." He flashed his sabre out of his scabbard and waved it fiercely round his head. Everyone in the room ducked as the weapon swished over their heads.

Suddenly came the stutter of machine-guns. Everyone rushed to the windows. There, in front of their eyes, an enormous grey iron monster rumbled and coughed its way through the main street. "Germans!" said Kovalenko. "Now we have them where we want them."

Leah pressed Shura nearer to her.

"What do you mean," said Boris, "where we want them?"

"Well, they are coming within my range," said Kovalenko. "Oh, the sons of bitches, they don't know what they are in for. They think they are safe in those sardine-tins. But just you wait. Just you wait, monsieur."

"Don't say monsieur, say herr," Boris begged.

"All the Russian soldiers used to say monsieur during the war with Napoleon. Why shouldn't I call the invader monsieur too?"

"Well," said Maruska, sitting down heavily on the table so that it cracked. "What are we going to do?"

Kovalenko took charge. He advanced into the centre of the room. "Now the first thing you do is not to warm those cases of dynamite with your bottom. They may explode. Get hold of yourselves. There is nothing terrible. I've seen Germans before. They can be beaten like other men. We will constitute ourselves into a guerilla force."

"What do you mean by 'we'?" Boris asked. "There are only us two and the two women and Shura. What sort of a guerilla force could we be?"

"We can be a very good guerilla force. I shall be the commander and you will be my second-in-command, Boris. Maruska will be our intelligence."

"Oh," groaned Maruska, "I don't want to be anybody's intelligence."

"I am sorry to use a technical term," apologized Kovalenko. "You will report to us every night how many tanks and armoured cars pass through the village. You will sit by the window and count. You, Leah, you can look after Shura."

"I hope Mishka doesn't come," said Leah, "it would be terrible. They'd shoot him."

"Oh, don't worry," Kovalenko assured her, "that young husband of yours has got plenty of sense. He is my son. He will stay away for the time being."

"Queer," said Maruska, drying her tears. "I thought you said the men were going to blow up the barns and the Co-operative Hall. I can't see any fires."

"Why," shouted Kovalenko, running to the window, "the bastards. The bastards!"

"It looks as if someone has been playing the traitor," said Boris.

"Playing the traitor, eh? Well, I am sorry for them. Wait till you and I get hold of them, Boris. We'll take the skins off their backs."

"Now," said Kovalenko, turning to the women. "You have your instructions. Boris and I will melt away. We'll try and join up with some of the peasants that are prowling around the countryside and form a guerrilla band. You will hear from us every night. If you don't, don't worry. We may be gone on our travels quite a long time."

Nobody quite knew what Kovalenko meant, but everybody was upset.

Boris kissed his child affectionately. "Smile, Shura," he said, "here—here is a kiss from Mother."

Leah kept on looking out of the window anxiously. "Oh, don't worry about him!" Kovalenko ordered. "Come on, Boris, we have business to do. And pick up a case of dynamite."

SEVEN

THE very first place the German Commander of the forces occupying Petrokovka visited was the office of the collective farm's director.

Burenko received Colonel Schulze with smiles. "Ah, General!" he said. The Commander saluted and then, turning to his *aide*, said something in German.

"The Commandant," said his *aide*, speaking in perfect Russian, "wishes to congratulate you, Mr. Burenko. We notice that all the farm buildings are intact. We trust that you have managed to preserve the grain and the fodder." The German Commandant nodded hopefully.

"I am afraid," said Burenko, "it was all I could do to prevent the buildings being blown up. But the grain and the fodder have unfortunately been carted away. One or two barns have escaped their attention and you will find those have plenty of hay. I have made a complete inventory for your Excellency."

The *aide* turned to the Commandant with a sheet of paper that Burenko had handed him. "You see," he said, "how the Soviet Government terrorizes the population. They have forced them to cart everything away. Otherwise, I promise you, Herr Colonel, they

would have met us with songs and garlands in the traditional Russian manner."

"With bread and salt," said Burenko, "with bread and salt." And he produced a small black loaf with a salt cellar.

"Quite," said the German. Then he said something rapidly and, after flipping his hand to his cap, walked out of Burenko's office.

"But, Maxim Feodorovitch," said Burenko, "I very nearly didn't recognize you in that uniform."

"It must be a little deceptive, Ignati Pavlovitch. But it doesn't matter how one comes to regain one's land, does it? Twenty years I have been away from Petrokovka, but I swore I would return. And here I am."

"Back to the land of your ancestors," said Burenko; "it's a pity the ignorant peasantry has flown. But they will return. They will return to do the winter sowing for you, Maxim Feodorovitch."

The former landowner rubbed his hands. "Excellent," he said. "Of course, we must do everything to help the occupying forces of the Reich Chancellor. He has promised to return the estates to us. Very soon we will have a government of our own in Kiev. When Moscow is taken, perhaps we will even have a Tsar."

"A bright future!" exclaimed Burenko fervently. "And I hope I shan't be forgotten."

"You may rest assured on that point," said the landowner. "I shall see that you are rewarded. I believe you owned considerable land in this village."

"Yes, yes," Burenko cried. "Considerable land. Why, about a thousand acres. It was all mine. I swear it. I still have the deeds." He thrust them into the officer's hand. The officer took them and put them into his pocket without looking at them.

"I hope, perhaps, that I may become a dvorianin, a State councillor," said Burenko.

"For the time being," answered the officer, "I appoint you bailiff of my estate. We shall talk about the State councillorship later."

"But who will I have to work under me?" Burenko implored. "I must have people."

"As we capture the riff-raff, I'll send them here to my farm. I've seen plenty of peasants wandering about. We can corral them. They will be only too glad to get some honest work after the Red terror. Tell me, Gospodin Burenko, it must have been an awful life whilst we have been away."

"Oh, a terrible life, your Excellency. Nothing to eat, nothing to wear. We have had the OGPU sitting in the village with machine-guns every day. Every day for twenty years."

The officer looked at Burenko's fat healthy body and considered that perhaps Gospodin Burenko was allowing himself a poetic licence. Nevertheless, a small shudder passed through his frame. "We shall sweep away Communism. We shall return to the good old days. Never you fear. Men like you who have suffered, we will hold up as an example of the true Russian!"

"Yes," said the traitor fervently; "perhaps you will even see that I get a medal."

But the estate owner did not reply. He shook Burenko's hand gingerly and departed.

EIGHT

KOVALENKO had not made an accurate forecast when he said that Mishka would not make an attempt to return to Petrokovka. The latter had barely reached the top of Eagle's Hill when he saw the long procession of tanks entering into the village. Mishka was torn between a desire to blow up the barns and to return to Petrokovka to pick up his family.

"The barns will be blown up," he argued to himself, "by the men detailed to the job. Burenko said everything had been arranged beforehand." He sped furiously in an attempt to get round on the north side of the village, which as yet was unoccupied by the enemy. But the tank advance cut across his path. He knew it would be certain death to run the gauntlet now. Swearing and weeping with agony, his heart filled with terrible thoughts, he turned the car round and made his way to Zaporozhye.

The dishevelled, unhappy young man who entered into the chief engineer's office at Zaporozhye was treated very kindly. He told the story in staccato sentences.

"The same has happened to many of us," he was told. "Bear up. One way or another your wife will be able to get out. Guerillas are operating everything. If anything happens to them, they will extract a terrible vengeance from the Germans."

"But I don't want vengeance," said Mishka, "I want Leah. I want her alive and safe. And my sister's little daughter, Shura. What of my father and mother?"

"Son," said the chief engineer, "what about the hundreds of thousands of fathers and mothers and wives and little children? This has just come from Moscow," he said, pointing to a fat-looking package which was lying on his desk. "I have a feeling it concerns you."

"Concerns me?" said Mishka. He lifted his eyes up hopefully. "Perhaps it's a letter from them." Then he saw the official stamp and his heart sank. "Oh, it's another assignment," he said, "it's nothing."

But he was wrong. It was a special assignment. It was the assignment to blow up the Dnieper Dam.

NINE

COLD grey dawn was breaking. A long line of lorries was proceeding towards the dam. Mishka sat in the leading lorry. The twelve trucks contained many cases of dynamite.

Mishka was more disconsolate than ever. "It's only euthanasia," he kept on saying to himself. "We are killing the dam now because it's helpless, so that it won't fall into their hands. But we can build it again—we will build it again!"

There, in the distance, tracer bullets gleamed red and green. An enemy plane was reconnoitring. The greedy eyes of the Fascists were fixed on the greatest dam of the world. Surely, the Russians would not dare to blow up this miracle of construction. Surely, they would pause before it. So reasoned the Nazis.

Now the anti-aircraft guns boomed, chasing away the solitary reconnaissance plane. At least, no Fascist eyes would look upon the suicide of the great Dnieper Dam.

As the lorries made their way towards it, Mishka looked across the Dnieper. The broad mother river where a bare twenty miles away stood his native village of Petrokovka. The steppe had been scorched. The steppe that had but recently waved with golden wheat. They had reached the eastern end of the dam.

Silently they unloaded the cases of dynamite. Men had been working with drills all through the night. They had been tearing out great chunks of concrete from the dam's side. Into these Mishka ordered the dynamite to be placed.

It was a long job. Many cases had already been laid the night before. All that Mishka had to do was to set the fuses. His was the hand that would send up this monument of engineering into dust.

He had been selected its murderer, but he knew that he was innocent. It was they, the Fascists, the Nazis, who had commanded it. It was they who had sent out their plane to see whether the Russians had dared to blow it up. Well, they had dared.

It was six o'clock in the morning. The turbines had stopped. Once again the mighty river would flow free. Once again the music of the cataracts would be heard. That great source of life, electricity, would be denied to a wide area. Lenin had taught the people the meaning of electricity. Lenin, had he been alive, would have agreed to this act.

It was six o'clock. Mishka's hand jerked down the handle. The morning stillness was broken with a terrific roar. The engineers and the workmen looked at each other in dismay. They all had tears in their eyes at that moment. Quickly the memories flashed through their minds.

Mishka recalled the years when the dam was under construction. He felt so old at that moment. The dam was a memory of his youth. He had mixed cement for it with his own hands. He had seen the first blue-prints, the promise of a new age after the years of hunger, bloodshed, and civil war. This was a child of the Soviet people.

For a full quarter of an hour the men stood staring at the rushing waters of the Dnieper. Enormous breaches had been made in the dam. It was bleeding white silvery blood. Then Mishka spoke. "Never mind, comrades," he said, "we will build a new one. We will build it better and faster. Our people have had experience now.

The great thing is confidence. With that in our hearts, we can build anything . . . new and even more gigantic dams."

They walked in anguished silence to the waiting lorries and drove quickly away.

TEN

PETER had examined the new and powerful machines bearing British identification marks which were standing ready on the aerodrome. After his engineering curiosity had been satisfied he was introduced to the members of the British wing which had come to the Soviet Union.

Peter spoke some English. What he spoke, he spoke fluently. But the only trouble was, as he said, his knowledge of fluent English was not unlimited. Actually, Peter spoke technical English. He knew all the parts of an aeroplane. He knew the various aeronautical terms, all the verbs connected with those terms.

"Let us fly into the mess!" he said, not knowing the word for go. "There you will be able to rest and read the log books."

"What on earth," asked a tall, sandy-haired Scotsman—whose name was Jock MacDonald—"what log books?"

"English log books," said Peter bravely. "We have received some English ones," said Peter; "you might be pleased to have these log books from home." It turned out that what Peter meant was newspapers. But the word had escaped him.

The Scotsman beamed when he saw copies of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express*. They were only two days out of date. Jock had been attached to Peter's squadron as instructor. He found the Russians extraordinarily quick learners and after a very few flights they had already mastered the various mechanisms of the Spitfires and Hurricanes and were exultant. Jock was enthusiastic about the Stormovicks, the Red Air Force special fast bombers.

Peter was operational chief at the aerodrome. But that did not prevent him from taking a number of flights himself. Jock had found that he had been able to teach the Russians all they wanted to know about the British machines in a few days and was now burning to get at the Nazis himself. He had shot down thirty German planes during the Battle of Britain in 1940 and was determined to compete with the Russian aces under Peter Kovalenko's command.

They were sitting in the mess room. Jock was looking through the 'log books', glancing down at the theatre and cinema page, thinking of home. Peter was sitting reading a heavy-looking tome. Jock looked up at him once or twice but, seeing he was engrossed, did not disturb him. In the end his curiosity got the better of him. "Don't you Russians ever relax?" he asked. "You are always reading big books. I suppose it's something on aeronautics, Commander. Read me a little."

Peter obediently read out a few lines. "Why, it sounds beautiful!" said Jock. "It sounds magnificent."

"It should," said Peter; "it's Shakespeare's log-book—I mean drama, play, what you call it."

"Shakespeare!" said Jock. "Don't tell me you read Shakespeare here."

"We read all your chassiss."

"Classics," Jock corrected.

"Classics then. Dickens, Bernard Shaw, every one of them."

"What did you read out to me just now?" asked Jock.

Peter, as he had the English translation on the opposite page, had no difficulty in giving a correct rendering. "*Julius Caesar*," he said. "There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune."

"It sounds just as good in Russian," Jock said seriously. "By the way, Shakespeare reminds me of something."

"Just what he should do," said Peter.

"He reminds me that I should ask you to allow me to go up with your bombing squadron to-morrow as one of the fighter protection."

"Oh, no, no, no," said Peter. "He doesn't remind me of that. He reminds me that you are an instructor. You can go round in circles over the aerodrome and if you see a Nazi by accident, then you can shoot him down. But no looking for Nazis as fighter protection."

"The fact is," Jock protested, "I am a trained pilot. I've taught you everything you want to know. Come, let me go up with you to-morrow."

"Your post is as instructor," said Peter solemnly. "And instructor you stay."

"What's the matter, are you afraid I shall shoot down more planes than you?"

"Not at all. Get a change in your status and you can fly with pleasure."

"By Shakespeare, I'll do that," said Jock, getting up and hurrying to the door.

Next morning, confirmation of the change in Jock's status arrived, and he was allowed to go up with the other fighter planes on a bombing raid behind the German lines. The object was to destroy railway lines and bomb any tanks or lorries on the way.

There was a shining look of triumph on Jock's face as he put on his parachute harness and held up his thumb to Peter. Peter first thought that he meant it as a mild insult that he had got it his own way. But as the fighters took off he saw Jock waving his hand at him, indicating that he would make himself a special guardian of his plane. "Then I'll feel safe," mocked Peter, over the communicating radio.

The formation, about twenty strong, composed evenly of bombers and fighters, flew uneventfully over the first three-quarters of an hour. There was plenty of opportunity to use their bombs but they had instructions to penetrate deeply into enemy occupied territory. They flew over Kiev and saw the Dnieper beneath them.

Suddenly a group of about thirty-five Messerschmitts appeared

on their left. The Messerschmitts split up into fighting formation and swooped down like falcons on the bombers.

"My, what a gallery of clay pigeons!" Jock wirelessed to Peter. "Now watch me chew them." He shot up like an arrow to meet the Messerschmitt flight of three. The Nazi pilot swerved so as to give the two planes following him an open target. But Jock was quick on his controls and brought the machine zooming on the Nazi's tail. He got a burst into the cockpit: a few seconds and the Messerschmitt was swaying wildly out of control.

"One," shouted Jock to Peter. But Peter did not reply. He was steering straight for his target. He sent a stick of bombs amongst a moving caravan of lorries and watched them scatter like beads as his bomb made a great gash in the earth.

Jock climbed with the other fighters to make an umbrella over the bombers. The Messerschmitts re-formed and tried to attack from underneath. Jock swooped into a cloud of them, his machine-guns shooting into a closely-huddled bunch. Another one was knocked out. One Messerschmitt retired from the fight and was limping home, smoke pouring out of its fuselage.

Suddenly bullets ripped into Jock's machine. He could almost feel the wing of his Spitfire being cut in half. The machine toppled on one side and began to stall quickly.

"My number is up," sang Jock over the wireless, "good-bye, Commander. Remember me to Shakespeare the next time you read him." And then, releasing the hatch, he jumped into space.

"I bet one of the bastards will try and make a shooting gallery out of me." He was right. The Messerschmitt waited for his parachute to open and then began pumping lead in Jock's direction.

But Peter brought his heavy craft round so that his two gunners could sweep the Messerschmitt from the side. A lucky cannon shot smashed the Nazi plane into smithereens. The last that Peter saw of Jock was when the Scotsman clasped his hands like a boxer and shook them over his head. A strange and unfamiliar sign to Peter, but he knew what he meant. He had to continue on his way to the target. Jock's was the fortune of war. He had sought the tide and the tide had carried him away.

ELEVEN

WHEN Boris and his father-in-law melted into the countryside they had no idea where they were going. For hours on end they crept about in ditches and hid behind trees. They had spent one whole night in a tree. Kovalenko had hauled up the heavy dynamite cases amongst the branches and secured them there. He made a small plan by scratching on a piece of bark with his sabre, and put it next to his breast.

Most of his time he had occupied in counting the number of German tanks and lorries that passed them on the way. He called this intelligence, a mysterious word to Boris to whom it did not seem particularly

intelligent as Kovalenko very often counted the same ones as they circled round to find suitable positions. But still it made Kovalenko merry. The more he counted, the more he swore he would destroy.

Boris called himself a fool many times over. He was not to be consoled by the wonderful name which Kovalenko had invented for the detachment of two: 'The Avengers'. Here he was with an old man, sitting up on a tree and calling himself an avenger.

They had gone without food the whole day. He would have gladly exchanged the dynamite for a pound of bread. But Kovalenko sternly chewed his moustache. It helped, he swore, to appease his pangs. "You should grow one too," he told Boris, "it helps a lot. One can suck them for hours and pretend they are fish or meat. Just as your fancy runs."

They slept like sparrows in the tree. When dawn broke they looked down and found that at the foot of the tree stood about ten men, all with a variety of instruments. Some with rifles, others with knives and pitchforks. They were a few of the villagers who had also wandered blindly into the countryside in search of a leader.

When Kovalenko came down from the tree they were not at all surprised. "Ah, Vassili," said Petka, "we knew it was you."

"How did you know?" asked Kovalenko. "Did you have blood-hounds?"

"No," said Petka, pointing to the regular pits in the ground, "it was raining last night and we followed these little holes. We know the holes your foot makes on the ground, Vassili. It led us to this tree and here we are. What are you going to do with us?"

"I am going to drill you," roared Kovalenko. "I am going to make you soldiers, partisans. From now on consider yourselves the Avengers. And don't stand there gaping at me. The first thing to do is to take an oath."

"Very well," said Petka, "we'll take an oath. You got an oath to suggest?"

Kovalenko thought for a moment. "I've been working one out all night. Here it is:

"I, a citizen of the great Soviet Union, true son of the heroic Ukrainian people, promise not to lay down arms until the last Fascist on Ukrainian soil is destroyed. I promise unreservedly to obey all orders of my commanders and strictly to observe military discipline.

"The destruction of our towns and villages, the death of our children, torture, violence, and insult to my people I promise to avenge always, mercilessly and without pity. Blood shall be avenged by blood and death by death.

"I promise to help the Red Army in every way to destroy the rabid enemy, sparing no efforts nor life itself. I declare that I would sooner die in cruel battle with the enemy than surrender myself and my family and my people to be slaves of a bloodthirsty Fascism.

"Should I, by weakness, cowardice, or evil design, violate this oath and betray the interests of my people, may I suffer a shameful death at the hands of my comrades."

Kovalenko made each one of the guerillas take the oath separately. It was a lengthy business, but he enjoyed the noble phrases. When everybody had finished, he made his son-in-law repeat it slowly and solemnly.

Refreshed in spirit the guerillas began to sort out their arms. "There are not enough rifles," said Kovalenko; "but we will capture them from the Germans. We need an automatic or two, perhaps a light machine-gun. Even a tank wouldn't be out of place."

"What do you mean, a tank?" asked Boris. "We can't all live in a tank. And, besides, the Germans would spot us."

"We'll keep the tank in the wood here," said Kovalenko, "and use it on special occasions."

"And what occasions have you got in mind, Comrade Commander?" asked Petka.

"You all know very well," said Kovalenko. "Someone disobeyed my orders. The barns near Eagle's Hill, the collective hall, the tractor and fuel station, they haven't been blown up."

"I've just come from the village," said one of the collective farmers. His name was Stephen. "And I saw Burenko talking to a German officer."

"Well, we won't have hard thoughts about Comrade Burenko," said the Commander, "not until we know quite definitely that it is his fault the buildings haven't been blown up. Now, the first thing is, as I say, to capture some arms and a tank if possible. The second, we must establish an intelligence service. I have counted at least a hundred vehicles. That information is valuable to our command. There are twelve of us here and I shall appoint a couple of the nimblest as runners. I'd be a runner myself but for my gammy leg. Well, every evening we creep back to the village and find out how many tanks and armoured lorries have passed through."

"How do you know that?" asked Boris in astonishment.

"Intelligence," said Kovalenko, seriously tapping his head. "I have my system."

Suddenly they heard the unmistakable clatter of machinery. They stopped talking and hid amongst the bushes.

Four German tanks entered the wood cautiously. They were obviously bent on seeking out any pockets of Red Army resistance. They lumbered past Kovalenko and his men with their flaps open. A few yards farther down one of the tanks stopped in a clearing, whilst the other three spread out into different directions.

"They must have heard of our presence," said Kovalenko. "They are trying to encircle us. Now, you see, that's our prey, that chap over there."

"What chap? You don't mean to say you expect us to attack a tank with pitchforks?"

Kovalenko smiled. "No," he answered. "We'll attack it with guile. As a matter of fact, I am going to attack it single-handed."

"Now, please, Father," Boris pleaded, "enough of this. If we must die, let's die together."

But Kovalenko shook Boris's hand from his arm savagely. "I shall do it," he said, "by guile."

The peasants trained their few weapons at the tank as Kovalenko, lying on his belly, crept very quietly to the clearing where the tank stood. Many minutes seemed to pass. He moved cautiously, rustling scarcely a leaf. Then, when he was underneath the tractor-wheel, the collective farmers saw to their astonishment how Kovalenko hoisted himself up. They saw Kovalenko peering carefully into the open tank turret. Then, with astonishing speed, his hand seemed to dive into it. He grabbed something and brought out a blond head, held firmly by the hair with one hand. Kovalenko's other hand seized his prisoner by the throat and pinched hard to prevent any yell; hoisting the hapless man over his shoulder like a baby, he slid down the tank with extraordinary agility and brought the kill over to the astonished collective farmers' inspection.

"There," he said cheerfully, "what did I say? I pinched a tank single-handed. It's only a little tank, but it will do."

Petka immediately relieved the astonished prisoner of his revolver. "Can you speak Russian?" asked Kovalenko.

The blond prisoner was unable to reply as Kovalenko had forgotten to take his hand off his gullet. "He obviously can't," said Kovalenko, still holding on to the man's throat.

"I suggest you release him, Father," Boris advised. "My German is rusty, but I expect he won't be able to understand any language after you have finished with him."

"Very well," said Kovalenko, releasing his grip.

Barely had he done so when the German opened his mouth to give a yell. Kovalenko, as quick as lightning, thrust a finger into the astonished German's mouth and held him by the tongue. "Tell him I'll bash his brains out if he doesn't keep quiet."

"*Sei ruhig!*" ordered Boris. The prisoner nodded his head.

"Listen, you idiot," said Kovalenko, "what brought you to Russia?"

"*Warum bist Du nach Russland gekommen?*" translated Boris.

"The Fuehrer promised us victory. He said it was the last battle."

"The last!" laughed Kovalenko, "is that what he said? It's the first. We are only just beginning. We are only getting into our stride. Well, we'll have to take him along with us until we find someone to hand him over to."

"Wouldn't it be better to kill him?" said Petka. "He might do us a dirty trick."

"That's against the international law or something," answered Kovalenko. "Besides, he may not be such a big Nazi as he thinks. We might train him up to be a human being."

That night a solitary tank rode into Petrokovka. It stopped

mysteriously for a moment outside Kovalenko's hut. A woman was seen to hand over a small bag. And then the tank passed on to the village hall. Boris and Kovalenko skilfully inserted some sticks of dynamite round the foundations.

They were just about to blow it up when Kovalenko remembered that a picture of him riding Mazurka II was hanging in a prominent position in the hall. He insisted on fetching it. At the risk of his life he crept in and brought out the enormous canvas which he strapped to the back of the tank.

Then the two men put a time-fuse and, under the nose of the German sentries, drove their tank back to the forest. They had made the correct recognition signals. The signals they had learned from the guerilla's prisoner-of-war.

TWELVE

EARLY next day Kovalenko was counting out the contents of the bag that his wife had given him. "What on earth are you doing with those peas and beans?" asked Boris. "You are not going to have them for breakfast, are you? They look quite dry."

"That's my intelligence service," said Kovalenko. "The peas represent small tanks and armoured cars, the beans stand for the larger tanks. Maruska sits all day in front of the window shelling peas and beans. You see, no one suspects her. It's infallible. Now, Boris, I nominate you for the honour of taking this information through the German lines to the Red Army. Will you do it?"

"If you think I am experienced enough," said Boris anxiously.

"I think you love life enough," said Kovalenko. "That's why I give you this dangerous job. Because you have to love life to do it well. Can you remember the number? Sixty-seven small tanks and thirty-nine heavies: sixty-seven, thirty-nine. If they catch you don't give anything away. Our lives depend upon it."

Boris agreed to observe the conditions faithfully. They guided him out of the forest and shook his hand. But just as they were shaking Boris's hand they saw a parachute opening high above them. The men instinctively raised their rifles. "Keep them down, you idiots!" warned Kovalenko. "Let's wait and see who he is."

"He is a German all right," said Petka. "Our men don't jump out. They'll ram the planes, I've heard. He hasn't rammed anybody. He is just sailing down comfortably as you please. Look at him. You'd think he was on holiday."

"He might be a German," Kovalenko agreed. "Hey, you," he addressed the German prisoner, "take your coat and pants off! I'll put them on. I'll pretend I am a German and give him a nice surprise." Kovalenko hurriedly put on the jerkin and trousers, and hobbled over with as great dignity as he could muster to the parachutist who had landed skilfully in the forest clearing.

"Herr," said Kovalenko—that was the only word of German he had learned from the prisoner so far.

Jock, seeing a man dressed in German uniform running towards him, immediately drew his revolver. But before he was able to shoot, his hands were pinned against him by six guerilla fighters who had jumped out of the bushes nearby. Kovalenko, with a terrific swing of his fist, laid him out flat. "Obviously a German!" he said. "He goes out so easily."

They bent down over the airman and searched for his papers. Had it not been for Boris, they would have found some difficulty in making out the strange language. "English," he said. "He is an Englishman. That's a fine way to treat an ally."

"Oh," groaned Kovalenko. "Just wait till he wakes up. They've got an awful temper, those sandy-haired Englishmen."

The guerillas were terrified of having laid low an ally. "But we didn't mean to," they pleaded. "After all, he'll understand."

"He looks a nice young man," said Kovalenko. "Pity I've had to hit him on the jaw. Here, give me some water. If we moisten his lips, he'll come to."

Jock's return to consciousness did not take long. After five minutes he was sitting up blinking his eye and rubbing his chin. When he saw the rough clothes and earnest faces of the partisans, he grinned. "Hallo, boys," he said in English. "Got any vodka?"

"Why does he ask for vodka?" asked Kovalenko. "At this time of the day, too. Can you talk to him, Boris?"

"Oh, yes," said Boris, "I learned English at school. We are sorry," he said politely to the airman, helping him to his feet. "We are Soviet guerillas. We have looked through your papers and you are a friend."

"Well, that's fine," said Jock. "Now, how about enrolling me as one of you? I've just lost my aeroplane but I've still got a revolver."

Boris doubtfully translated Jock's sentiments to Kovalenko.

"Excellent. Tell him we have a tank. Explain it's a sort of aeroplane without wings. He can drive that for us. Perhaps one day we may have our own guerilla air force. One day I'll just yawn and stretch my hand out into the sky and pull one of those Messerschmitts down. Tell him that."

Jock laughed heartily and was very soon much at home. "What is your commander's name?" he asked Boris.

When Boris had told him, Jock roared with delight. "Why, another Kovalenko. They seem to be all over the place. Tell him I know his son. He is a grand fellow. We were just bombing a convoy of lorries and tanks when I was shot down."

When Kovalenko heard that his son was taking part in the raids, he danced a jig of delight. "You see, intelligence," he said. "Every time we send a report of the number of tanks that have passed through the village, Peter can sweep down with his falcons and bomb them to blazes."

"Tell me," said Jock, speaking to Boris, "the Germans must be

using a hidden aerodrome somewhere here. Those Messerschmitts came upon us quite suddenly. I am certain they must have risen from somewhere around here."

"Yes," said Kovalenko, "they are using a meadow at the foot of Eagle's Hill. I've noticed a few of them flying down and disappearing behind the ridge. Does the English pilot suggest we should go out and capture a few planes for him?"

"More important than planes," said Jock, "is that we should destroy as many of the enemy's as possible."

Kovalenko was enthusiastic about the idea. He thought it best to leave the tank in the wood hidden under a mountain of branches. "We'll be moving in fairly open country," he explained, "and they can easily spot us."

Jock and the guerillas skirted the forest. Kovalenko was an infallible guide. He seemed to know every lane and without bothering to look at the compass he brought them out at the foot of a meadow which the Germans were using as an auxiliary air-field.

The guerillas fell upon the aerodrome guards and, after a short fight, wiped them all out. They then sat down to wait.

"Here they come," said Kovalenko, after a two hours' patient vigil. Three aeroplanes suddenly swooped out of the sky and landed in perfect formation on the field. "Now don't make a noise," said Kovalenko. "And don't fire a shot. When they come out to stretch their legs, just hit them on the head and don't touch the planes. They will be a good decoy."

Kovalenko's instinct justified itself. After the three German fighter pilots had been carefully disposed of, the guerillas sat down patiently to wait again. Another three planes appeared, and seeing that their comrades had landed safely, they, too, touched ground. Once again Kovalenko and his guerillas wiped them out. Then another set came. Then another, until twelve brand new Messerschmitts stood on the field. "I don't think we'll wait for more," said Jock. "It would be too optimistic. I expect all their wireless controls are speaking." He went over and fixed his flying ear-phones to the German planes.

He heard a man shouting clearly something about 'antwort'.

Jock's schoolboy humour got the best of him. Speaking in the only language he knew, he told the German control room that twelve of their Messerschmitts were going to be sent up in flames in a moment. "Toodledoo," he ended.

"Now," said Kovalenko, who had a sense of humour very much like Jock's, "you can take one of these beasts and fly away. Go back to my son, Englishman, and tell him his father is well. Tell him also what the partisans are doing. And tell him sixty-seven small tanks and thirty-nine heavies have passed through the village. And if you happen to see the Prime Minister of England, tell him that I, Kovalenko, said that you are a brave man."

"Well," said Jock, "I don't like to leave you chaps, but I think it's best. After all, I can take back all the information you have gathered and also the greetings to your son."

Jock clambered into the Messerschmitt. Before he shut the hatch, Boris called over to him: "Tell Peter to tell his sister that her husband is well and sends his love. Tell her not to worry about her daughter."

As the Messerschmitt, piloted by the Scotsman, rose into the air, the guerillas set the other eleven planes on fire. Eleven mournful wisps of black fire rose into the sky as Kovalenko and his guerrillas disappeared into the forest again.

THIRTEEN

BURENKO was summoned by the German Commandant. He stood stiffly to attention before the august personage, and gazed unblinkingly into the monocled face of the Prussian. "No, your Excellency"; "Yes, your Excellency"; "Of course, your Excellency", was all he seemed able to say.

But the Commandant was furious. "We have appointed you as mayor of the village," he told Burenko, "but you don't seem to be able to keep order. Who has blown up the hall under our very eyes? Who has blown up the barns? Who has destroyed twelve of our aeroplanes? Blown up pontoons? Demolished tanks? Who?"

"The guerrillas, your Excellency. The misguided peasantry, sir."

"Have you had the proclamations posted in every street?"

"Yes, your Excellency. There are more proclamations than there are houses. Everything has been explained to them."

"Then why do they fight against the authorities? Don't they know that I can burn the village over their heads?"

"But please, your Excellency, think of the property," Burenko pleaded.

"I am perfectly prepared to think of the property. The Ukraine now belongs to Germany. I shall give this village twenty-four hours in which to surrender the incendiaries, to name the men who are committing these outrages." He turned to his aide. "I believe I am right in saying that the leader of these bandits is a man with a gammy leg. Some preposterous peasant that has become a legend in this district in the last two weeks. You know who he is?"

"Why no, your Excellency," said Burenko, hoping that the village would be left intact by the Germans.

"Haven't you got any man with wooden legs living in your dirty hole?" asked the officer. Burenko thought.

"Think again," the Commandant advised. "If you are hiding anything so much the worse for you. You will be mayor of dust and ashes if you don't speak the truth."

"Well," said Burenko, "there is a man, but he is very old. It couldn't be him," he stuttered.

"What is his name?"

"His name is Comrade . . ."

"We don't recognize any comrades here, Herr Burenko. What is his name?"

"Kovalenko," the German-appointed mayor gasped. He was almost frightened to mention the name.

"And has he a house here?"

"Yes. The third down the street."

"Very well then, you and Herr Koslovsky go and interrogate his family."

"They have probably disappeared," said Burenko, "but we'll go, we'll go."

"And take some soldiers with you," warned the Commandant.

When the two men and a platoon of soldiers entered Kovalenko's hut they found Maruska shelling peas. She did not bother to stop as the Germans entered. "Line up," ordered Koslovsky. "You are now talking to the man who owns the village of Petrokovka. If you behave yourselves and help the authorities, you will be allowed to till the land." He pointed to Maruska, and speaking to Burenko, asked him who she was.

"She is the wife," Burenko whispered.

"So you are the wife of this Kovalenko. Where is your husband, my good woman?"

"I don't know," Maruska replied calmly. "He left some weeks ago."

"And you haven't seen or heard of him?"

"No. He left with the other peasants."

"Then why did he leave you here?"

"I don't know. I suppose there was no time."

"And who is that young woman?" asked the officer, pointing to Leah.

"She is my son's wife."

"And the girl?"

"She is my daughter's daughter."

"It's all very confusing," said the officer. "The whole lot of you are lying. It's obvious. You," he said to Leah, "where is your husband?"

"I don't know."

"Well, then, perhaps we'll help you to know." He seized her by the wrist and pushed her over to the soldiers. "Help her to make up her mind, will you?" One of the soldiers greedily seized Leah round the waist and hauled her out of the hut.

Little Shura ran to her grandmother and buried her face in her lap. Very soon there was a terrible scream from Leah and then silence. "You know," said Burenko, "I don't think this is strictly necessary, your Excellency."

"It is necessary to teach these people a lesson," the officer snapped back. The soldiers brought back the lifeless body of Leah.

"Hang her up on the door-post with this message: 'She refused to tell of the whereabouts of the guerillas.'" Then, turning to Maruska, he said: "Listen, old woman, do you want to go and join your daughter-in-law? Where is this Kovalenko? Where is your husband?"

Maruska stared for a moment at the hate-filled face of the officer, but she did not reply. "Make her speak!" he ordered Burenko.

Burenko advanced and clasped his hands piously in front of him, "Please, Maria Alexandrovna, please speak. Really, you know, it doesn't pay to be obstinate. No harm will come to you or to your husband. Only he must be taught the error of his ways. The Revolution is over, Maria Alexandrovna. Russia will have a Tsar. Now it's no good being obstinate. Tell us where your husband is. I promise you no harm will come to him."

Maruska clasped her hands in front of her. "You are a liar and a traitor," said this old woman, "and no Tsar will come to rule over the Soviet people. If you want my husband, find him for yourself. But I warn you, for every death you have caused, a hundred of you will die. For every tear you have made people shed, you will shed a thousand."

"All right," said the officer, "hang her. These obstinate peasants. They never seem to learn."

They hanged Maruska over the door-beam and jeered as she died. Only Burenko hid his face in his hands, for he had a premonition.

"Now," said the officer, "perhaps the child will speak. Come here," he called the little girl. Then he softened his voice. "Sit down there, my dear. Don't be afraid."

"I am not afraid," said Shura boldly. "I am not afraid of anything."

"That's right. Now you see your grandmother was a bad woman. So was your auntie. They wouldn't help us. But you will help us, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, I'll help you," said Shura.

"We want to know where your grandfather is gone. You probably heard people speak about him in your house. We won't do him any harm. We'll just bring him back here and he can go on living with you. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Good. Now you tell me everything. I'll write it down." The officer took a knife out of his pocket and after he had sharpened his pencil, laid it down on the table. "Remember," he warned, "no lies. We'll punish you severely if you tell lies."

"I won't tell lies," said Shura.

"That's a good girl." The officer turned to Burenko: "You see, that's the way to deal with children. They are much more helpful than the grown-ups." He took a bag full of sweets out of his pocket. "Here, have a sweet! We'll give you lots of sweets if you tell us everything."

Shura approached the table and sat down on the chair beside the officer. She smoothed down her hair and put one hand into the paper bag which the officer had pushed out in front of him. With the other hand she suddenly seized the clasp-knife on the table and plunged it into the officer's chest with all her might.

FOURTEEN

BORIS was reading out an article from the *Pravda*. Kovalenko's guerilla force had now swollen to more than two hundred men. They were planning a campaign of action against the headquarters of the German tank brigade in Petrokovka. As yet, they had not heard of Maruska's and Leah's fate, let alone what had happened to Shura.

"This is written by Alexei Tolstoy," Boris said. A deep silence fell upon the men. Alexei Tolstoy was a beloved and well-known writer.

Boris began:

"This evil has fallen on us all. The enemy is ruining our land with fire; his tanks scar our fields. He wants everything that is ours—that has been ours through the age-long centuries.

"The fortunate and unfortunate gather together. Even he who hoped to hide like a cricket in a dark barn and chirrup away there till better times, even he now realizes that alone one cannot save oneself. Our motherland prevails over all other feelings.

"Everything we see around us, things that perhaps we hardly even noticed—or never valued—the smell of rye-bread in the smoke, the snow swirling round the cottage—all this becomes immeasurably dear to us. All faces, all eyes, reflect one single absorbing thought. We who live in this age are the guardians and caretakers of our motherland.

"This movement of the people springs from the depths of the centuries and reaches out to the longed-for future in which they believe and which they create with their own hands for themselves and the coming generations.

"Some day the various national streams will merge into one storm-free sea, into one single humanity; but this belongs to the future. At present our age is an age of grim struggle for our independence, for our freedom and for the right to build our society and our happiness according to our own laws.

"Insane Fascism is the enemy of all national culture, including that of Germany. It strives to crush any national culture, to wipe it out. Its Pan-German idea of all the world for the Germans is the wily ruse of a big financial gamble in which countries, cities and men are only a form of impersonal stock-exchange quotations flung into the total war. The German soldiers taken prisoner before Mozhaisk and Maloyaroslavets and before Leningrad are just as void of personality, just as bedraggled and filthy as paper money in the hands of international speculators and other riff-raff.

"The Nazi Command unload this deadened mass of humanity like sacks on to the bayonets and guns of the Red Army. They march no longer believing in anything, not even that once they lived in their own land, or that some time or other they will return. Germany has become nothing more than a factory turning out war machines and human cannon fodder.

"By the fifth month of the eastern war every German, unless he is

weak-minded, has realized that to conquer the whole world will be even more difficult than to advance ten miles or so before Mozhaik.

"These are the people who intended to conquer us, to drive us from Moscow and from the whole of our land.

"To hell with these Germans! Millions they may be, but we have many millions more. At present they have a superiority in armaments, especially tanks. But arms are fired by men. The Red Army is annihilating these men who do the firing. With increasing experience, confidence and cool-headedness our Red Army is doing its work of annihilating the Germans. They are making a last and desperate attempt on Moscow, in the vain hope of breaking through to the heart of our native land.

"Their calculations are crazy. Moscow is more than a strategic point, more than the capital of our State. Moscow is the idea which embraces the whole of our culture in all its national dynamic. Our road to the future lies through Moscow. Near Moscow the German war machine will be exhausted, and then the whole trend of the war will change.

"The land of our forefathers has swallowed not a few hordes of invaders striving to conquer it. In the west empires rose up and perished. The great were debased. The rich were made poor. Our native land grew and strengthened and nothing can shake it. Our land will swallow these German hordes. Thus it was. Thus it will be!"

When Boris had stopped reading, the men turned round to discuss the article, to appreciate the fine phrases and the finer sentiments which motivated the writer. The paper was more than three weeks old. Now they knew the conditions on the Moscow front had changed radically. Moscow was in great and mortal danger. The Nazi army had pushed near Klin. Kovalenko's guerrillas, more determined by the news, struck many new and daring blows at the enemy.

"And here is a lighter interlude," said Kovalenko. "We have found these letters on the bodies of the last lot of Germans we have killed. Here, Boris, you translate this one, from Halvar Trotz, to his wife Elizabeth."

Boris read:

"Dear wife,

I have already material for four dresses. I shall try to get more. It is very difficult to get anything much here, but I am now more cunning than I was in France. Write and let me know if you received the ring."

The guerrillas roared with laughter. "What about this one?" asked Kovalenko.

Boris read out another letter. "This one is more tender," he said, "it's to a German private from his wife. Listen, she begins:

'My dear Fritz,

Many thanks for the skirt you sent me. Can you get any stockings there, my darling? We cannot get anything here. Can you get any stockings, silk, shirts, underwear, or any kind of good material where you are? If you can get any of these do send them to me.'"

The men had been constantly in action over ten days. They defeated various punitive expeditions which had been sent out against them in the forest. They hadn't bathed or changed their linen for a month. The need for cleanliness came upon them suddenly. There was a broad cool stream in their forest hide-out which the men used to bathe in.

But Kovalenko's orders were very strict. There had to be at least half of the company on guard before the others could wash. Boris, as second-in-command, had always the duty of selecting the men for washing and those that were to stand on guard. "Load the machine-guns and the rifles," ordered Kovalenko; "have them ready to fire."

Fifty men stripped like one and plunged into the water. A huge chunk of soap was passed round and great tufts of grass were torn off to be used as scrubbing-brushes.

Suddenly came the rattle of automatic rifles. "To arms," shouted Kovalenko, leaping naked out of the water and seizing a machine-gun. The clothed and unclothed men fell on the grass, and began firing on the attacking enemy.

Apparently it was only a small scouting party and Kovalenko's men found no difficulty in scaring them off. But he knew that as not all the Germans had been killed, they would have to move their camp because on the next day the Germans would send a much larger force to round them up.

After the men had finished washing, Kovalenko addressed them thus: "I am glad to see," he said, "that you behaved like soldiers. Even without your trousers. They tell a story of Peter the Great. There was once a soldier who was standing sentry guard on the bank of the Neva. He suddenly took it into his head that he would like a bath. He stripped, put his clothes next to the rifle and hopped into the water. Well, then Peter himself appeared on the bank. The soldier immediately jumped out of the river, grabbed his rifle, stood to attention and rapped out: 'Beg to report.' Said Peter the Great to him: 'You deserve to be shot for deserting your post. But in view of the fact that when you jumped out of the river, you grabbed the rifle and not your trousers, your punishment will be mitigated.' And you did well, lads. You not only grabbed your rifles but you also gave the enemy one in his trousers."

FIFTEEN

THE December offensive swept the Germans out of reach of Moscow. The Russians battered them with every advancing step. German communiqués announced that the retreat was according to plan—to stabilize a winter-line; but nowhere was the front stabilized.

Instead, the new armies of the Soviet Union threw themselves into the winter fray. With them was Olga. She was with the forces that re-occupied Yasnaya Polyana. Her mind flew back fifteen years

when she and her husband had come to Yasnaya Polyana for their honeymoon.

The scene of desolation was terrible. Olga gasped in horror. "How could they?" she asked. "How could they? What was it all for? What victory can they gain by desecration?"

The Germans had been in Yasnaya Polyana for a month and a half. Before retreating southwards, the remnants of the routed 296th division set fire to everything that could at all remind the world of Tolstoy's name.

Olga gazed with tears in her eyes at the wooden summer-houses in which she and Boris had often sat and held hands. The beautiful secondary school, called after Tolstoy, too, had been set on fire. The rest-home and the small hospital—they were bonfires.

She was speaking to Maria Schegoleva, a member of the museum staff. "Why, they have even destroyed the bridge he built with his own hands. The garden-benches. Where is the apple orchard which he loved so much?"

"Only one thing," said Schegoleva, "one thing only escaped and that was the house that at one time belonged to Prince Volkonsky. How and why that escaped fire, we don't know." Then she told Olga the whole story.

"It was on 29th October that Swastika-marked aeroplanes first appeared over Yasnaya Polyana." But she could not go on any further with the recital. "Here," she said, "here is a cutting from a paper. Read it for yourself."

And Olga read in silence with her head bent. "They machine-gunned and bombed the estate and the surrounding villages furiously, although no Red Army troops were here. Only by good luck no bomb hit the Museum.

"Many people were killed by bombs in the Yasnaya Polyana collective-farm, including the chairman. At two o'clock in the afternoon Tolstoy's great-granddaughter, Sofia Tolstoy, came running to the cellar under the Museum, where our staff were sheltering from the bombs, and said German tanks were passing the estate along the highway.

"Soon three German officers came to the estate and demanded the keys of the Museum. After making a tour of the halls, they snatched the visitors' book and wrote: 'The first three Germans in the campaign against Russia have arrived in Yasnaya Polyana.'

"They installed themselves in Volkonsky's house and began plundering the estate. They caught all the chickens and wrung their necks, slaughtered the forester's cow and broke open wardrobes in search of warm things. The curator was ordered to clear the Literature Museum of all exhibits. He replied: 'That is impossible. You must understand that Leo Tolstoy lived here. Better find another house.' They shouted: 'Shut up and obey orders!' while a German menacingly presented a Tommy-gun.

"On the morning of 31st October the Germans began breaking up the Literature Museum. Exhibits which it took decades to gather,

the rarest manuscripts and books, furniture, paintings by Repin, Levitan, Surkov and other eminent Russian artists, numerous photographs, books by Tolstoy published in all the languages of the world—all these were thrown into the cellar.

"Then came the turn of the 'Museum of the Epoch', the house where Tolstoy lived. 'This will be the barracks' was the German general's order. All the exhibits of this Museum were thrown into a great heap in the hall and on the terrace. German officers broke open the wardrobe and trunk and even took underwear which had been Tolstoy's. Higher ranks were interested in souvenirs—rare photographs and wood carvings. These disappeared into their knapsacks. Hay and straw were brought into the rooms and Nazi soldiers made themselves at home in the Museum of Yasnaya Polyana.

"On one occasion they began chopping up Tolstoy's dining-room table and his arm-chair for firewood. A member of the Museum staff applied for help to a certain Demidov, a former landlord, whom the Germans had brought along with them. He snubbed the complainant. 'The Museum will be liquidated,' he said. 'This will be an agricultural estate.' The Museum staff, however, maintained their protest, saying that there was firewood in the vicinity. A German doctor named Schwartz said: 'We do not need any firewood, but we will burn everything connected with the name of your Tolstoy.'

"The Nazis turned one section of the house into a latrine. Valuable trees and shrubs, planted by the writer himself, were ruthlessly felled. Valuables, such as furniture and pictures, were loaded on lorries and sent to Germany.

"Before retreating from Yasnaya Polyana, the Germans decided to burn down the Tolstoy Museum. In the library room they built a great stack of firewood, straw and books, soaked it all in kerosene and set fire to it. The fire destroyed the floor and the walls. The grey winter sky can be seen through holes in the ceiling. Another bonfire was lit in the room where Tolstoy himself lived. Here the walls are black with smoke, the door is charred. A third fire was lit in the room of the author's wife, Sofia Andreevna, which now bears the same charred appearance.

"The German plan, however, was thwarted by Soviet men. Despite machine-gun fire, a young doctor from Tula Hospital, Iliukhin, and a secondary school student, Komarovskiy, made their way to the blazing house and began putting out the flames. Soon members of the Museum staff, Shehegolev and his wife, and collective-farmers, came to their assistance. They fought the fire for four hours and saved the house.

"We walked along the narrow path through the forest to Tolstoy's grave, a spot sacred to every Russian and to every cultured person in the world. We shall not forget Yasnaya Polyana."

SIXTEEN

SOME time after Jock's departure, Kovalenko and his guerrillas surrounded the village of Petrokovka. Stealthily, like soulless shadows, they approached from the darkness. Kovalenko had dearly wanted to bring his tank. But caution prompted him to go on foot.

Every German sentry they passed, they dispatched in the silent inimitable way of Kovalenko's hard fist.

When he and Boris, together with about ten men, reached the garden-gate of his hut, Kovalenko put his hand into the hedge and began rummaging about. "Where the devil are the peas and beans?" he said.

Boris had already discerned through the darkness the bodies of Leah and Maruska. He stifled his gasp so as not to reveal his horror to Kovalenko. But as the old man was about to enter the hut, so he saw the body of his wife swinging heavily in the breeze.

Fury, a terrible fury entered his eyes. Then he glanced down to the foot of the swaying corpses and saw the small body of Shura riddled with countless rifle shots and stabbed with bayonets.

Boris cried out, unable to restrain himself. But Kovalenko seized him fiercely by the arm and said: "Come on. They shall pay for it."

Burenko's cottage was not far away. They found him in bed. When the terrible figure of Kovalenko came into view, he dived helplessly into his bedclothes and clung to the feather-bed. "Come on, Burenko. You are going to visit your friend, the Commandant."

"Oh, no, no, no, no," screamed Burenko, please believe me. I had nothing to do with it, Vassili Stepanovitch. Nothing at all. I would not touch a hair of your family's head. I am not a child-killer, you know me. I am your old friend, your collective farm director. I am faithful to the Soviet, I am a revolutionary. Oh, comrades, comrades, let me join you, let me fight with you against these murderers! These assassins of babies, oh, let me, let me!"

"Get up," said Kovalenko, drawing his enormous sabre, "or I'll split you in two like a melon. Put your trousers on."

Burenko obeyed weakly. His hand instinctively went under his pillow. "You won't need your money," said Kovalenko. "The thirty pieces of silver are no use to you now, Mr. Burenko."

"Where are you taking me?" Burenko cried. "I must know. For the peace of my soul, I must know. I am not a wicked man, comrades. I am a foolish man. I confess everything."

"You are going to dinner," said Kovalenko.

"To dinner?" Burenko's eyes glistened. "Then are we going to have dinner together?"

"Yes," said Kovalenko, "together. Together with the German officers." Burenko left his cottage without a struggle.

Kovalenko forced him down on his knees and made him creep along beside him like a reptile on his belly. Another two sentries were garrotted silently.

A light was burning in the collective farm office which the German officers had converted into a mess. Noiselessly the guerillas surrounded the place. "You are going in there, Burenko. You are going to sit down with them at the table as if nothing had happened."

"But I am not invited," Burenko protested. "How can I? Nothing is going to happen, is it?"

"Nothing that you will remember," answered Kovalenko. "Go on." They thrust the hapless Burenko towards the door.

He stumbled a few times on the steps and then entered the room. The ten German officers had just time to place a look of astonishment on their faces when ten grenades smashed their way through the windows and exploded.

"That is that," said Kovalenko. "Let us now bury our dead."

SEVENTEEN

As Kovalenko lifted the tortured little body of Shura and pressed it to his breast, so a drone of aeroplanes suddenly grew louder. Artillery began to open fire on Petrokovka. Apparently the presence of the guerillas was known. Thousands of incendiaries rained down on the wooden houses. But Kovalenko and his men stood their ground. They were paying their last respect to the dead. His own hut was flaming. The fire was licking at the feet of Maruska and Leah. The old man looked terrible as he spoke.

"Our beloved native Kolkhouz will soon lie before us in a waste of ashes. Better given to the fire than to the enemy. Burned hands bowed the trees to the earth. Don't worry, brothers, the branches will grow again more beautiful, the Kolkhouz estate will be green again. New beautiful cottages will rise again. Our daughters will plant the gardens with thyme and mint and sunflower. The rain will run down into pails from a new gutter. Our songs of freedom will be heard again, more beautiful, more loyal, across our new life, one forever in the fight against the bloody Fascists. It will all come. It is inevitable. We are coming, brothers. We shall return."

"We shall return," said the guerillas, lifting their fists and shaking them to the heavens.

